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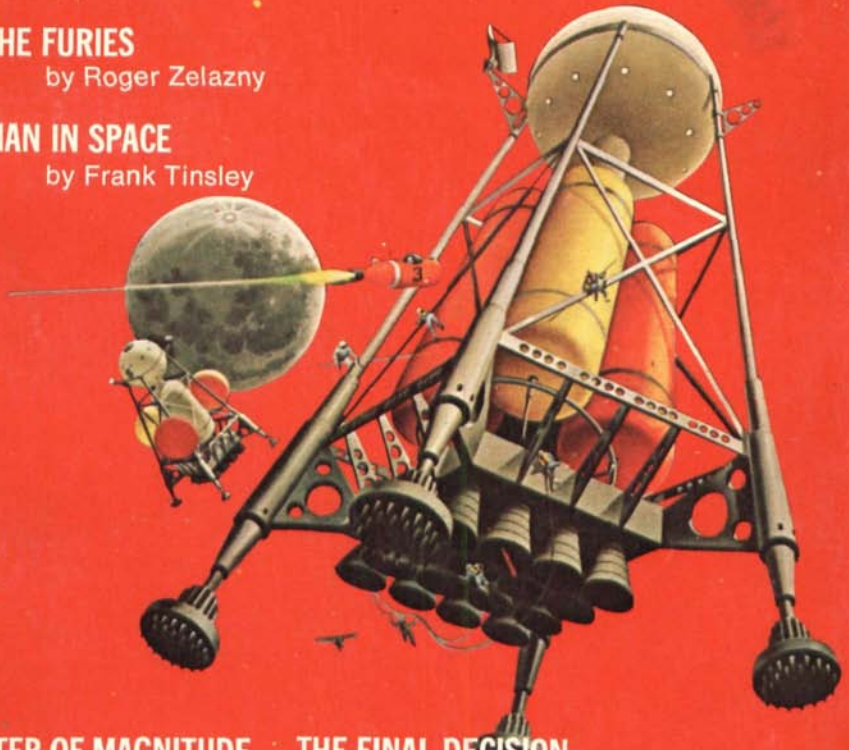

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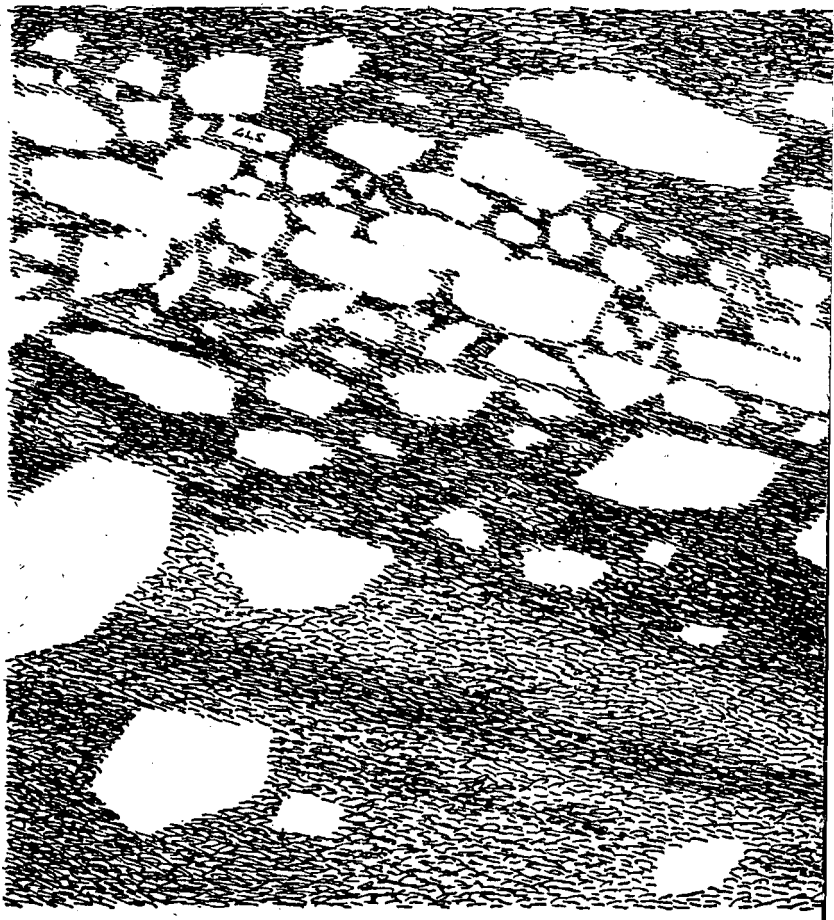

Not often does a science-fiction writer essay a love story. This is, in many ways, a love story. Of a man for a son, of a man for a woman, of a man for lost worlds and space and time. And of a woman's love for courage.

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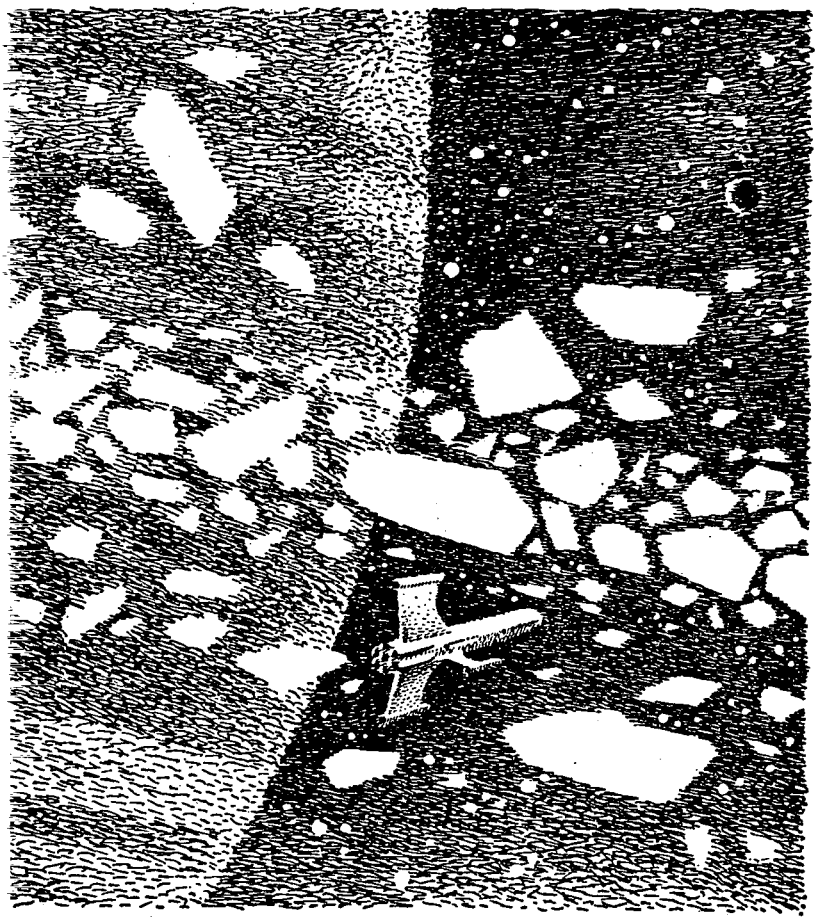

The HoneyEarthers by Robert F. Young

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And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away.

—2 Samuel 18:9

THE kid thrilled as the first ice-grapnel hurtled forth from the *Ganymede's* belly gun and sank its giant fingers into the orbiting floe. The other members of the grapnel crew stood by indifferently, their faces stolid behind the visi-visors of their helmets; but the kid was only fifteen and this was his first trip to the rings, and for him there was magic in every moment of the day and night.

The floe gave a slight shudder when the belly-gun crew tautened the grapnel cable, but it did not deviate from its orbit. The ring floes ranged in size from the dimensions of a medium-sized mountain. This one was as large as a hill—as large, in fact, as the great green hill that rose beyond the junior citizen's home that the kid had run away from before lying about his age and getting a job as an apprentice grapnelman with one of the waterlanes companies. Unlike the orphanage hill, however, the floe wasn't green. It was gray.

The *Ganymede's* belly gun spoke again, and a second grapnel leaped through the glinting mist of ice particles that fringed the rings, and found the floe. Again, the floe shuddered when the cable slack was taken up; again, it remained true to its orbit. Beyond it, and before and behind and "below" and "above" it—and as far as the eye could see—other floes marched in the awesome orbital parade that had brought Saturn fame and Earthmen fortunes.

A third grapnel found its mark. A fourth and a fifth and a sixth. Now the time had come for the grapnel crew to go into action. The kid checked his knee-crampons, made certain that his ice-hook was within easy reach of his left hand. In his bulky spacesuit he felt as big and as capable as the other members of the crew. With them, he descended the six steel ladders that ran down the floe freighter's hull to the cable apertures, and with them he started crawling out over the cables toward the floe. His grapnel was no. 4. When he reached it he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and dug his knee-crampons into the ice. Then he began stringing the reinforcing lines that were attached to the grapnel's "wrist". There were three of them altogether, and the object was to spread them out and

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secure their ends to the side of the floe that faced away from the freighter.

SATURN's massive bulk occulted the sun, but there was plenty of starlight to see by. The kid worked industriously, determined to prove that he was as fast as the next man. He got one line strung out, and secured it by means of the self-driving piton at its end. He got the second line into place, went back for the third. Stringing it, he looked around at the other grapnelmen. To his chagrin, he saw that their lines were already in place and that they were cramponing back toward the cables.

Angrily, he activated the final piton, and started cramponing "over the hill" himself. He'd show them! He'd—

He must have taken too big a bite with his ice-hook. He could not get his right knee far enough in under him to sink its crampon. Furious with himself, he gripped the underpart of the leg with his right hand and added the strength of his biceps to the strength of his rectus femoris. It was the worst thing he could have done, and if he had been thinking clearly he would have known it. His left crampon broke free, and both knees went out from in under him and he was left clinging to his ice-hook with one hand.

He supplemented his hold with his other hand; then, to his horror, he felt the hook pull free. A moment later, he was drifting in space a few feet from the surface of the floe.

The feet might just as well have been miles. "May-day! May-day!" he shouted into his helmet transmitter. "Acknowledge! Acknowledge!"

Silence.

He shouted the words again. And again and again. Each time, the silence grew louder. Abruptly he remembered that all during the stringing operation the scattered small talk that usually went on among the older grapnelmen had been absent from his ears, and simultaneously he remembered he hadn't checked his helmet radio for days.

Well, he'd just have to wait till the rest of the crew missed him and came back for him—that was all. But suppose they didn't miss him soon enough? Suppose they didn't notice his absence until after the floe had been taken on board and dropped into the vat? Although he no longer had contact with the floe, he was a prisoner of its mass, and wherever the floe went, he would go too. And the floe was going into the *Ganymede's* vat. And the temperature of the *Ganymede's* vat during grapneling operations was maintained at an even 300 degrees.

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The kid was only fifteen years old and this was his first trip to the rings and this was the first time he had ever looked upon the face of death. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances—he panicked. And when the slow turning of his body brought his feet in line with the surface of the floe, he doubled up his legs and thrust out with them with all his might. His feet struck the floe solidly, and the resultant impetus sent him drifting into the rings.

How deep into the rings he went before he managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe, he did not know. But he knew that thanks to his impulsive action it was now next to impossible for the crew of the *Ganymede* to find him; that once they discovered he was no longer on the original floe, they probably wouldn't even try to find him. Such a search would be both impractical and time-consuming, and he was nothing but a homeless kid whom no one would miss anyway.

He dug his crampons into the floe and clung tightly to the ice-hook with both hands. Space-fright seized him and shook him till his brain seemed to implode; till the sound of his own screams caused him to go temporarily deaf. He closed his eyes, still screaming, still clinging to the glinting surface of the floe. Nothingness broke around him in great dark waves, and churned and swirled and eddied; and then, suddenly, the nothingness gave way to awareness, and he remembered where he was.

When he opened his eyes he saw that the floe wasn't as deep in the rings as he had thought. Then he saw the ship. He had known then that he wasn't going to die after all, but what he had not known was that part of him was already dead.

I

WHEN Aaron Price stepped from the lift onto the mobile boarding platform, she was standing among the HoneyEarthers, waiting for him. But she was not a HoneyEarther, nor was he. And yet he loved her. Loved her the way robins love spring rains, the way gulls love uplifting autumn winds, the way meadowlarks love the morning sun. For to him, Fleurette was all of these things—and many more.

She was carrying a small overnight bag that matched the blueness of her coat, and her willowy legs were like the stems of flowers. Behind her, the HoneyEarth Express pointed like a stubby finger toward the star-clad sky. Carrying his own overnight bag, he went over to her and said, softly so that he would not be overheard, "I'm glad you

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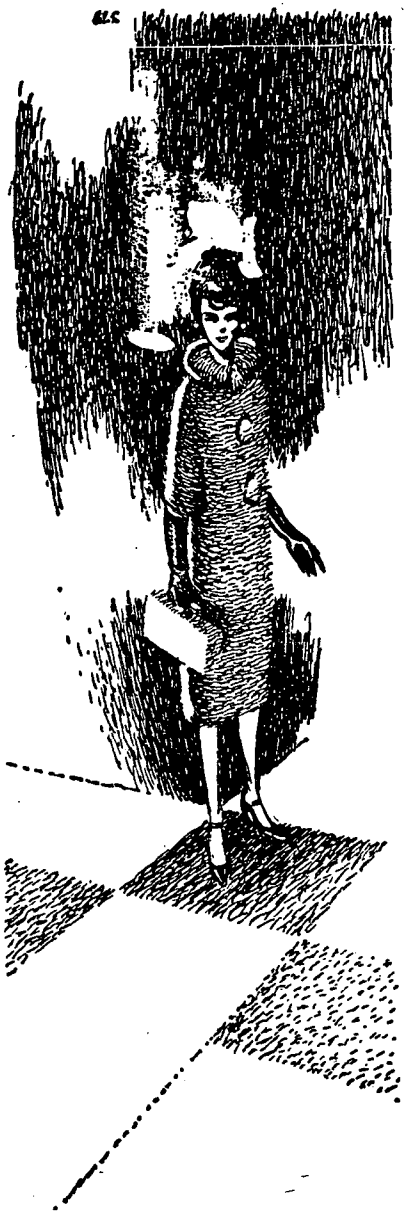

came. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't."

"But I'd have blamed myself."

"It'll be all right. We'll have to take one of their famous double rooms, of course——there aren't any others available. But I'll give you the golden key, and it'll be the same as staying in any other hostel."

"When did he run away?" she asked. "You didn't tell me over the phone."

"Last night."

"And you don't think he'll ever come back?"

Price shook his head. "I know he won't. He can't."

Her gray eyes misted, and she turned away. But not before he glimpsed the single tear that rolled starlike down her gentle cheek. The girlish lines of her nose and chin came through his sadness and touched his heart, and he found it hard to believe that she was nearing thirty. He rejoiced in the luster of her upswept dark-brown hair. Then he saw the faint bruise on her temple, and suddenly he wanted to cry and simultaneously he wanted to kill; but it was too late for crying, and he had already numbered the days of his life on the fingers of his hand.

He became aware that the HoneyEarthers were staring at him—the HoneyEarthers from Earth, and the HoneyEarthers from Croewl and Fargastar and

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remote Guanlago who were sojourning on Earth and who, in a chronological sense, were as incongruous as he was. Well let them stare, he thought. Stares weren't stones, and men with partners young enough to be their daughters were no new thing under the sun.

The locks of the HoneyEarth Express swung wide, and a voluptuous "moonmiad" stepped into the glare of the gantry lights. "Loveflight 6235-B," she announced in crooning tones. "Departure time, 1900 hours; arrival time, 0102 hours. All aboard, you lucky lovers you!"

With her bare legs and her half-bare breasts, she reminded Price of the fun girls who walked the arcades of the lower cities. Why was it that society leered at HoneyEarthers? Why was it that HoneyEarth hostels like the Earthlight Inn deliberately discolored their services with excessive overtones of sex? Why was it that people were so eager to reduce love to the dimensions of a dirty joke and so reluctant to accord it its proper place in the sun?

CONFETTI-like synthi-rice was drifting down from an overhead dispenser as he handed the moonmaid the two tickets he had bought that afternoon. He was careful not to meet her eyes, for he knew all too well the calculating look she was giving his spaceburned aging face and the concomitant look she was giving Fleurette's young loveliness. In the ship, he followed Fleurette up the spiral stairway to the third level where their reserved seat was. It was more like a lounge than a seat, and the compartment contained three others just like it. After removing their coats and sitting down, they buckled their acceleration belts in place and looked through the portscope at the distant lights of Greater Boston. Presently Fleurette turned and faced him. "Poor Aron *pere*," he said softly. "He hurt you as much as he did me, didn't he."

Price nodded. "I'll never forgive him for what he did—never."

"But you *have* to forgive him. Ronny's your son."

"I can't forgive him. And when I've said what I have to say, you'll understand why."

"Then say it, Aron *pere*."

"I can't—not now. Not without a drink to see me through. I'll say it over starwine on the moon—that way, it won't be so bad."

"Is that why you're taking me to such an exotic place?"

"No," Price said. "I'm taking you there because Ronny should have and never did. And because I don't relish the publicity that always accompanies a tax scandal, and the moon is one of the

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last places in the cosmos the fax-ferrets will expect me to show my face."

She lowered her gaze to her hands. They lay upon her lap, as gentle as the first flowers of spring. At length, she said, "Did he put his divorce declaration through before he left?"

"He didn't have time. But I have it on my desk and I can put it through if you want me to. However, I'd advise you against it. If you remain his wife, his share of the company will automatically become yours when he fails to return within ten years."

"You talk as though he's already left Earth."

"He has," Price said. "This morning, he shipped on one of the company freighters as an ordinary spaceman. It was the only way he could elude the troopers. I'm sorry, Fleurette."

She looked through the portscope at the distant lights. Her shoulders shook for a moment, then grew still. He wanted to put his arm around them, but did not dare. Her eyes, reflected in the portscope, met his, and she must have seen his anguish, for she said, "It's all right, Aaron *pere*. I'm not going to cry. In a moment I'll be myself again, and then I'll turn around and everything will be the way it was before."

No, Fleurette, he wanted to say, but didn't, *everything will* not *be the way it was before. The moving finger, having written, has moved on . . .*

The three other seats in the compartment had been taken—two of them by couples from Guanlago and Fargastar and the third by a couple from Earth—and presently the moonmaid came mincing up the spiral stairway and then back down it again, crooning the countdown as she checked to see whether all the acceleration belts were buckled. She winked at Price. "Twenty-five, you lucky lover you," she crooned. "Twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two . . ."

Price felt sick. Did his feelings for Fleurette lay naked in his eyes for the whole wide world to see? It would seem that way. There was no denying that the moonmaid had seen them, and apparently his son had known they were there all along. Ronny's cutting words of the night before came back and slashed his thoughts, and he drove them into the dark corners of his mind. But they came scurrying out of the shadows the minute he turned his back, and despite all he could do to stop it the ugly scene that had spawned them began building up around him once again.

Blast-off was almost a relief. He had grown his space wings decades ago, but g-buildup was

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still enough to drive everything from his mind. Fleurette was still a fledgling, and when break-free finally came the lips that usually made him think of red raspberries were only a shade less gray than her face. After the grav unit went on, he rubbed her wrists till color came back into her cheeks and until her lips turned raspberry-red again. "It's all over now," he said. "Now we can sit back and enjoy the ride."

She turned toward the port-scope, gasped when she saw the stars. "They're beautiful out here, aren't they!"

He pointed. "That orange one over there is Aldebaran. That blue one's Achernar. Do you see those drops of light that look like drops of dew? They're the Pleiades . . ."

But only his eyes were on the stars. His thoughts were back on Earth.

II.

THE lift had taken him to the 124th floor of the Peregrine White Building and opened its door on the first level of the luxurious quadruplex that Ronny had leased after walking out on Fleurette. He ran a gantlet of mechmaids and robutlers and let himself into his son's study and closed the door behind him. Ronny was sitting behind a chrome-topped desk, talking into a tape-typer. If he was surprised to see Price, he did not show it. He pointed to a chair beside the desk. "Sit down, dad."

Price walked across the room, but he did not sit down. He stood before the desk and looked across its gleaming surface at his son. Despite its lack of spaceburn, the face before him bore a strong resemblance to the face he saw each morning in the mirror when he shaved. But he found it impossible to find himself in those blue and barren eyes, found it impossible to understand how people could still look at Ronny and exclaim, "You look *so* much like your father!"

The blue eyes held their ground, but there was a telltale quivering in the right eyelid. "I suppose you're angry with me, dad."

Price shook his head. "Not with you. With myself."

"For what? For growing old? Everybody grows old."

"And the older they grow, the more incompetent they become."

"I didn't retire you because I thought you were incompetent. You know better than that. I retired you because in another year you'll be fifty and would have had to retire anyway."

"I know," Price said. "The old have to move on to make place for the young. That's why I stepped aside two years ago and

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gave you the presidency of the company. But I never thought you'd retire me from the vice presidency behind my back. I thought you'd at least take the trouble to consult me."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"It's all right—forget about it. That's not the real reason I'm here. The real reason is Fleurette."

Ronny flushed. "I'm through with Fleurette, and you know it. So if that's why you came you can leave right now."

Price leaned forward and gripped the edge of the desk with his hand. "I didn't turn *all* my stock over to you, in case you've forgotten, and I still have a certain amount of prestige. I don't know how you talked the other stockholders into voting me out today, but I'll bet I can talk them into voting you out tomorrow just as easily. And I'll do it Ronny, so help me I will, if you declare a divorce against Fleurette!"

THE residue of boyhood that remained in Ronny's eyes departed. He stood up. "Go ahead then, old man! Talk them into it if you can. The declaration's all drawn up, and whether you succeed or not I'm putting it through in the morning!"

"It's she who should divorce you!" Price said. "And if the law read the way it used to, you'd get a divorce no other way. *You're* the adulterer—not her!"

For some time Ronny stood motionless. Then a slow trembling seemed to go through him, and he stepped back from the desk. His smile was as cold and foreboding as the ice floes of Saturn. "Am I now, old man?"

"Yes!" Price shouted. "Ten times, twenty times over. Do you think I don't know it? Do you think *she* doesn't know it? We've known it all along! But we thought you'd change. We never dreamed that associating with wantons would make you want to marry one—make it impossible for you to live with a decent girl."

"I should think you'd *want* me to declare a divorce, old man."

This time, it was Price who stepped back from the desk. "*Want* you to? That doesn't even make sense."

"Doesn't it, old man? I think it makes a lot of sense. I've got eyes, too. I've seen the way you look at her. Why old man, you've been in love with her for years. Do you remember that time we were staying at your chalet in Colorado? Do you remember how you went on one of those rare binges of yours and danced with her all one evening? Do you remember how I came out on the patio and saw the two of you standing in the moonlight? You were looking at her like a love-

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sick schoolboy! If I hadn't already guessed the truth, I'd have guessed it then. Not guessed it—known it. Some father you turned out to be!"

Price felt himself sway, and he took a wider stance to keep from falling. He knew that his face was gray—gray even through the spaceburn with which the stars had darkened it . . . The stars and the years and the loneliness came back to him, and the loneliness rose up in him and cried, *Why didn't you let them go, Aaron Price? Why did you try to get them back? Why didn't you leave well enough alone and make the best of what you had left to spend?*

Ronny was speaking again. Through the years and across the distances, Price heard his words: "So you see, old man, you'd only be working against yourself if you tried to get me voted out to stop me from divorcing Fleurette. In your heart, you want me to divorce her, and you know it."

"No," Price said weakly, "it's not that way at all. I want *you* to have her. To love her the way she loves you. That's all I've ever wanted. For you to have her and to love her forever—even though I've known all along that it could never be."

Sadly, he turned away and started walking toward the door. But the accumulated slings and arrows of the years had yet to exhaust themselves, and just before he reached the door, it opened, and brown-uniformed troopers carrying arachnid guns and wearing brassards with the letters IRS stamped on them stormed into the room.

IRS troopers were called in only when Grand Evasion was involved. Shocked, Price faced his son. "It must be a mistake, Ronny. Tell them it's a mistake!"

But it wasn't a mistake. Ronny's face said so, and his actions shouted the fact. He ran for the study window and threw the sash switch. One of the arachnid guns spat its web, and he eluded the filamentous fingers as he climbed up on the sill. Price saw then that he was wearing an anti-grav vest. That was all he saw. One of the troopers knocked him down, and when he regained his feet Ronny was gone.

III

THE Guanlagoan couple were making love. No one would have known it, though—no one except someone who had been to Guanlago.

Aaron Price had been to Guanlago. He had lived on Guanlago for more than two years.

He turned sideways on the lounge-seat, shutting off Fleurette's view. He knew that there

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was no need for him to, but the protective instinct that she aroused in him was forever making him do needless and quixotic things. One way or another, he had been trying to protect her ever since Ronny had brought her home.

That had been ten years ago.

Ten years . . . It didn't seem like ten years. It seemed like yesterday.

Fleurette said, "You're awfully quiet, Aaron *pere*."

"I know. The world is too much with me, I guess—even though we've left it behind . . . Have you made any plans, Fleurette? About what you're going to do, I mean."

"No. I—I have no plans at all."

"If I put the divorce through, the annuity Ronny had to set up for you in order to get the declaration drawn up would be more than enough to take care of you. But as I said, it'll be better not to, because if you remain married to him you'll automatically acquire his share in the company in ten years' time . . . Of course, there isn't really any problem with respect to your support, because I—"

"Yes?"

The near slip-of-the-tongue made him furious with himself. Naturally there wasn't any problem! How could there be when she was going to inherit everything he owned in a matter of a few days? "Because I can get you a good job with the company as soon as we get back to Earth," he extemporized, "and you can go right on enjoying the same standard of living you're accustomed to."

"But won't I be liable for Ronny's tax deficit? Won't they—"

Price shook his head. "I've taken the necessary steps to make up the deficit myself. They won't touch you."

"Then there wasn't really any need for him to run away! Oh Aaron, why did he?"

"Because he would have had to stand trial whether the deficit was made up or not and he'd have gotten a ten-to-fifteen year sentence." Price sighed. "But he'd have run away anyway. It was in the books for him to run away. He could no more have stopped running away than the sun could stop coming up in the morning."

"I—I don't understand."

IT'S funny," Price went on, "how a person can know something is going to happen—that it's bound to happen—and still manage to go on pretending that it won't. How he can convince himself so completely that he's actually surprised when it does happen. That was the way it was with me. I knew that when the day came Ronny would leave and

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that there would be a bona fide reason for his doing so. And I knew that there would be nothing I could do to stop him. I even knew approximately what day he would leave, and yet I was able to go on living as though that day would never come to pass. I didn't even recognize it when it came. I didn't want to recognize it, you see—and then, too, there was always the possibility that the pattern might change. As though it could! In a way, it was like your marriage, Fleurette. I knew that it wasn't working out, but I wouldn't recognize the fact. I refused to. And when I heard that Ronny was declaring a divorce, I was shocked!"

She turned away, gazed through the portscope at the slow drifting of the stars. "I was, too," she said. "I wouldn't face the truth either. Not even when he left me."

Impulsively, Price said. "You shouldn't have loved him so much. He isn't worth it. He isn't fit to buckle your shoes!"

She whirled so quickly that particles of starlight lingered in her eyes. "Don't say that, Aaron *pere*—don't ever dare say it again! He's your son, and I love him. I've always loved him and I always will!"

Helplessness gripped him, made him want to cry out in unendurable pain. Miserably, he looked beyond Fleurette's lovely head to where the Pleiades lay upon the face of space like freshshed tears. "All right," he said at last, "I'll never say it again."

After that, they were silent for a long time. Now and then, the ship creaked as it sped on its lunar trajectory. The couple from Earth gave birth to sporadic giggles, and a sad sweet susurrus came from the couple from Fargastar. The Gunlagoans were still.

At length, Price said, "Soon, we'll see the moon."

It edged slowly into sight, half in darkness, half in light. At this distance, the craters and the "seas" had a pale gold cast, but before long they would take on a tinge of silver. Fleurette gasped with delight, and leaned closer to the portscope, and he saw the reflection of her face in the glass. The eyes were wide now, like a child's, and her sense of wonder had brought an added fullness to her cheeks. It was the same face he had seen the night his son had brought her home all those wary years ago.

"Over there," he said, pointing, "you'll see the Leibnitz Mountains. They're just beyond the twilight belt. The Earthlight Inn stands at their feet."

"Where? I can see the Mountains, but I can't see the Inn."

He laughed. "Of course you can't, *jeune fille*. We're much too

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far away. But when we orbit in you'll be able to if you look real hard. Although it won't really be the Inn you'll see, but the gleam of Earthlight on its dome. The pleasure-dome, it's called."

HER face was so close to the portscope now that her nose was pressed against the glass. *Dad,* a voice cried in his mind. *Dad, dad!*

"A pleasure-dome," she said. "Why, it's a little like *Kubla Khan.*" Suddenly, she turned and faced him. " 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree,' " she recited all in a rush, " 'where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea!' "

Her gray eyes were enormous, her lips more than ever reminiscent of the wild raspberries he had gathered as a boy. *Dad, dad!* the voice cried again. *Wait'll you see, dad—wait'll you see!* "I'm afraid there aren't any rivers on the moon," he said. "Not even subterranean ones."

"Well I don't care!" She turned back toward the portscope. "Rivers or not, the moon puts Xanadu to shame!"

Dad! Dad!

"I've heard it said," he went on desperately, "that in twelve years' time the Inn has paid for itself twelve times over. But I'm inclined to doubt it."

Dad Dad! Wait'll you see—

He gave up then, and let the moment come through.

* * *

"—my wife! Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Price Past rotated his fireside chair and got to his feet. The library door had opened, and Ronny was standing on the threshold. "Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Wife? . . . The word cartwheeled and somersaulted about his mind, eluding his bewildered attempts to capture it. He was sure it wasn't the right word anyway. It *couldn't* be. Why, the boy was only nineteen! He had not even finished college yet. And what was he doing *home* from college? Surely, he hadn't gone out and—and—

A girl stepped into the room.

She had dark-brown hair. She was tall and slender. She had gray eyes and a round full face. The girlish dress she was wearing began below her shoulders, and the firelight had already fallen in love with her smooth clear skin. Meadow flowers grew around her, and her mouth had the redness of the wild raspberries that grew in the fields of his youth. Spring resided in the dew-brightness of her eyes; her cheeks held the hue of frost-kissed leaves. Spring, summer, fall and finally winter in the snow-whiteness of her hands.

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"This is Fleurette, dad. She's an exchange student from New France, and we met at school. Fleurette, this is my father."

She came like a summer wind across the room and kissed him, and he knew the fields once again; the fields and the woods and the warm summer sun, and the red and succulent berries that had stained his lips and filled his mouth with sweetness. "Aaron *pere*," she said, looking up into his eyes. "I will call you that—okay?"

He must have nodded, for she went on, "And Aaron Junior—I will call him Aaron *fils*. That way, there will never be confusion in the house of Price."

"But dad calls me Ronny for that very same reason," Ronny objected. "You'll be creating the very confusion you're trying to eliminate."

She faced him. "And I will also call you Ronny—when I get to know you better. But you—" and she turned back to Price—"I will always call Aaron *pere*."

"Why?" Price asked.

"Because I am French and like people to know it, and when I learn to speak your language better they will forget unless I remind them. It will be difficult to call you *pere*, though. You seem so young."

"To someone as young as you, I should seem as old as Methuselah."

"Methuselah indeed! With such brisk blue eyes and such dark-gold tan, you could never seem old to anyone!"

Ronny said, "That's spaceburn. Dad used to be a spacer, and spaceburn never fades."

The gray eyes grew large. "You have been all the way up to the stars? To the Other Planets?"

Price nodded. "To Fargastar and Guanlago. And oh yes—to Alphaghagar, too. But aren't we straying too far afield from the subject on hand?" He looked at Ronny. "Why didn't you let me know you were getting married?"

"We made up our minds in a hurry. And I guess we were afraid somebody would try to stop us."

"Fleurette's parents?"

"She hasn't any. She's an orphan . . . I guess it was you we were afraid of."

"You had good reason to be. You still have. I can get the marriage annulled in two hours' time."

Fleurette stepped close to him and gazed up into his face. "But you would not dare do such a disastrous thing, Aaron *pere!* I am the girl for him, and you know it. Look into my eyes and tell me that I am not."

He didn't need to look. All he needed to do was to listen to his heart. He went over to the liquor

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cabinet and got a bottle of brandy. He poured three glasses, handed one to his son and one to his daughter-in-law. He raised his own. "To you, *jeune fille*," he said to Fleurette. "To you, Ronny," he said to his son. "Many happy returns of the day."

IV

THE HoneyEarth Express came down on an Earthbeam and settled to rest on the great plain that spread out from the ragged foothills of the Leibnitz Mountains.

In the immediate foreground, the huge dome of the Earthlight Inn contrasted jarringly with the awry rock-formations of the foothills. Fronting the Inn proper were three smaller domes. The foremost was the landing-area dome, and from it a long enclosed ramp led to the two others, one of which housed the air-locks and the other of which housed the power-room. From the air-locks a larger enclosed ramp led to the ground floor of the Inn.

Earth was almost at the full, and her rich light had painted domes and plain and foothills in pale and dream-like grays. The stars lay like twinkling drops of morning dew on the black uprising fields of space. Moments after the ship landed, a big bus-cat came out of the landing-area dome, rolled across the intervening distance, and connected itself to the locks with a collapsible gang-tube. The locks opened then, and the HoneyEarthers filed down the tube and into the cat, and the cat recollapsed the tube and rolled back to the dome. Thence, it rolled up the ramp to the air-locks, passed through them, and discharged its passengers.

The lobby extended throughout the entire ground floor of the Inn, and it was as varied as it was huge. There were souvenir stands where you could buy love charms that came from all over the civilized sector of the galaxy. There was a gleaming automat where you could dial any dish under the seventeen suns. There was a small 3DT theatre where you attend a continuous performance of the latest histori-hit play, *Richard and Elizabeth*. There was a chrome-topped autobar at which you could sit on contour stools and drink from diapason steins that sang songs to suit your every mood. There was an electronic bowling alley where you could bowl 300 simply by regulating a dial. And lastly there was the long, altar-like counter where you signed your name in the famous HoneyEarth book and received your golden key.

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PRICE proceeded directly to the counter, Fleurette walking at his side. The clerk was a mech-man, but the smile he wore seemed sincere enough, and the hospitality that radiated from his synthi-face was all the more pleasant for its tangibility. He accepted Price's money with a polite bow, opened the big register, and Price wrote *Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Price, Earth* on the artificially yellowed page. He was in full command of himself now, and when the clerk handed him the gold-plated key that opened the door that connected his room to Fleurette's and that was supposed to remain in his possession during the HoneyEarth and to be retained by her as a keepsake afterward, he accepted it with the precise degree of tremulousness that Terran society—and mech-men, who were geared to the Terran *Zeitgeist* and who were triggered to sound an alarm at the first sign of atypical behavior—expected in a new Terran husband on his HoneyEarth night.

In the lift that carried them aloft to the HoneyEarth rooms, he handed the key to Fleurette. She accepted it without a word and dropped it into her purse. As they were stepping from the lift into the fifth-floor corridor, a soft voice spoke to them from a hidden speaker. "There's to be entertainment in the Earthlight Room half an hour from now, you Two," it said. "The management cordially invites you to be there."

"We *are* going to be there, aren't we?" Price asked.

"Of course, Aaron *pere*. But first I must freshen up."

Their HoneyEarth Nest—the Inn advertisements never referred to the highly publicized double rooms by any other term—had all the conveniences of home, and then some. At least his half of it did—he didn't enter hers. There were hidden lights that adapted the hue and the intensity of their radiance to your mood. There was a chair to sit on, a chair to recline on, and a chair that turned into a bed. There was a round table that served you coffee and sandwiches and salads. There was a square table that functioned as a checkerboard, a chessboard, a parchesi board, and a ouija board. There was a small 3DT screen on which you could view authentic portrayals of the meetings of David and Bathsheba, Solomon and Sheba, Paris and Helen, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Launcelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Isolde, Dante and Beatrice, Stendhal and Mathilde, Robert and Elizabeth, Richard and Elizabeth, and Entharkane and Guilla. There was a small bar with two flower-like

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stools in front of it, one of them labeled HERS, the other labeled HIS. And there was an adjoining bath where precious water from the rings fell like summer rain.

Showering, Price thought of space and stars and Fleurette. He dreaded the ordeal that lay before him, and yet in a way he looked forward to it. He deserved to suffer for what he had done. He wanted to suffer. But the point was, why should Fleurette have to suffer also?

Hadn't she suffered enough?

The memory of Ronny's philandering made him wince. But it wasn't the boy's philandering that had awakened his hatred. It was the first bruise he had seen on Fleurette's gentle face.

RONNY had laughed when he had accused him. Laughed and lied. And Price had believed him. At first. And then, months later, he had seen the second bruise. When Ronny had laughed and lied again, Price had nearly killed him. After that, he had seen no more bruises—

Until tonight.

Probably she had tried to stop Ronny from walking out on her. That would have provided him with enough provocation to strike her. Lord knew, he would not have needed very much.

On the surface, it didn't make sense. At first, Ronny had been happy with his lovely young wife. They had finished college together, and Price had set them up in a swank triplex and taken the boy into the company. He expected to find in him the same ambition he had found in himself, and he found it, too; but unlike his own ambition, Ronny's wasn't tempered by integrity or common decency. It wasn't tempered by anything at all. And the same could be said for his other natural inclinations. As soon as he hit his stride, he began to lie, to cheat; to chase. And he had been lying and cheating and chasing ever since.

Underneath the surface, however, Ronny's conduct made a lot of sense. He had had a silver spoon thrust into his mouth when he was too old for silver spoons. Human as well as concrete structures require foundations, and Ronny had had none. He had had to build on sand, and inevitably his house had gone awry and come tumbling down around him.

Shaving, Price regarded the reflection of his spaceburned face. "Why didn't you leave the years alone?" he said aloud. "All men lose their youths at one time and in one way or another. Wise men forget about the loss—only fools try to redeem it."

But perhaps he couldn't have left the years alone even if he

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had wanted to. Perhaps, in the final analysis, man's free will was a part of the price he had had to pay for the stars.

IT was after 0200 hours when they went down to the Earthlight Room. Fleurette gasped when they stepped out of the lift. Even Price was impressed.

The "room" took up one third of the dome's interior. The entire rear wall was given over to tiers of balconies, which were reached by tendril-like steel stairways. Opposite the balconies, a huge view-window looked out upon the plain and the ragged Leibnitz foothills, and framed in the window—centered in it, almost—was Earth. Blue-green and beautiful, clad in a lacy negligee of clouds, she rained down her pale and dream-like radiance, and the soft gray light lay upon the moonscape and filled the room, giving the effect of a three-dimensional painting done in chiaroscuro.

The floor was on three levels. The lowest level constituted the dance floor. Tables ringed it, and it was separated from the intermediate level by a low wall. On the intermediate level, tables stood along the base of the view-window, and this arrangement was repeated on the third level. Most of the tables were occupied, some by the couples, both Terran and alien, who had arrived on the last Express, and others by first and second HoneyEarthers who had come in earlier. A quartet of spotlights on the lofty ceiling of the dome created a little lake of brightness in the center of the dance floor, and in the brightness an itinerant ballet troupe was performing an ultra modern version of Stravinski's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Price chose a table on the third level that was close enough to the dance floor to afford a good view of the performance and far enough away from the nearest loud speaker to keep the taped music deep in the background. They ordered starwine when the mech-waiter came, and after it arrived in iridescent glasses they sipped it looking into each others' eyes. By Earthlight, Fleurette was even lovelier than she had been on that long-ago night in the light of the Colorado moon. Her décolleté gown left her shoulders bare, affording an ideal playground for Earthbeams, and chiaroscuro heightened, even while it softened, the poignant beauty of her face. "I never told you before," he said, "and perhaps I shouldn't be telling you now. But when Ronny brought you home and said you were his wife, I think I was as happy about it as he was."

"I know," she said. "I knew the minute I kissed you."

What else did she know?

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Price wondered. He had betrayed his feelings to Ronny. Had he betrayed them to her, too? He did not think he had. "Did Ronny ever tell you how I found him?" he asked.

She nodded. "Lots of times. When we were first married, it was all he used to talk about. About how brave you were. About—about how you'd lost your hand saving his life. Why did you adopt him, Aaron *pere?*"

"Because I loved him." Once, the admission would have embarrassed Price, but he was less sensitive to the shortcomings of the human race than he used to be, and to a considerable extent he had resigned himself to being a member of it—and part and parcel of its weaknesses—some time ago. "I loved him and I wanted to do everything I could for him. And he was so helpless. He was like a baby, almost. No memory—no identification even. He'd left his I.D. tags on the ship. He said there wasn't a ship, but I knew better. The minute I saw him, I wanted him to have everything I'd always wanted and never had the chance to get. And so I set about trying to destroy him."

"Through love?"

"No. Through selfishness. I wanted to live through him. People always act out of selfishness—don't you know that by this time, *jeune fille?*"

"Don't try to pass yourself off

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as an egotistic hedonist on me, Aaron *pere!* I know better. An egotistic hedonist wouldn't sacrifice his hand to save someone else's life."

"Of course he wouldn't. But in a way that's beside the point. I didn't sacrifice my hand—I lost it accidentally. And if I'd known I was going to lose it, I'd probably have let the kid stay where he was."

"I don't believe that for one minute, Aaron *pere.*"

Price didn't believe it for one minute either. "The only way I could get him off the floe," he went on, "was by sinking the anchor and going down the line. He was scared to death, poor kid—so scared he couldn't move. He had good cause to be, with those god-awful floes drifting all around him, with nothing but an ice-hook and a pair of knee-crampons to keep him from going adrift himself. I knew I had to get to him and get to him fast, before he panicked again . . ."

V

SATURN'S diamond-bright rings, "so various, so beautiful, so new" when viewed from afar, had "really neither joy, nor love, nor light" when viewed at close range. "Dirty snowballs" were what the floe-men called them, and basically that was all they were—agglomerations of ice and snow and dirt, some the size of mountains and some the size of hills and some the size of rocks, orbiting a world that was even less hospitable than they were. And because they were ice and snow and dirt, they were more valuable to Earth than diamonds would have been. The dirt could be discounted, but the snow and ice meant water—fresh water to supplement the supply that Earth, at tremendous expense, processed from her seas to quench the thirst of her billions of people and to irrigate her dehydrated lands.

Floe freighters were leviathans. They had to be, because the demand for their cargo was so great that it had to be transported in tremendous quantities. They never touched down on the face of Earth—they couldn't. They were built in space, and in space they remained; and when they returned from the rings they rendezvoused with ground-to-space tankers that sucked them dry, and then they went back to the rings for another payload. And the payload was always there, for to all intents and purposes the rings were inexhaustible.

To obtain a payload, all a freighter need to do was to go into orbit on the fringe of the rings, match its velocity with that of the outermost floes, and help itself. Nevertheless, there

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was danger involved. Jet propulsion was efficient enough for spaceships but not for individual spacemen, and when a floe was grapneled men had to crawl across the cables to its surface and move about by means of ice-hooks and knee-crampons while stringing the reinforcing lines. And sometimes ice-hooks broke free and sometimes knee-crampons didn't dig deeply enough, and then the grapnelman became a helpless piece of living flotsam, and a helpless piece of living flotsam he remained until his companions threw him a line. That was what had happened to the kid, only in the kid's case his companions hadn't thrown him a line. He had panicked and kicked himself into the rings before they missed him, and they had given him up for lost and the floe freighter had moved on to another lode. In the meantime, he had managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe and to dig in with his crampons. It was here that Price found him.

PRICE wasn't on a freighter. He was piloting a floe-charter. A floe charter was a small ship used by the waterlanes companies, his own included, to spot and catalogue good ring lodes—i.e., areas where the majority of the floes contained a minimum amount of dirt and a maximum amount of ice and snow. Dirt was dross, and took up valuable space in the vats, and experience had taught the waterlanes companies that the expense of charting a ring region before sending in a freighter was negligible when compared to the expense of hauling home some ten or twenty tons of worthless clay.

The floe that the kid was clinging to was a relatively small one. It was located a good eighth of a mile within the periphery, and this made getting to him a problem in its own right. But Price was determined as he had never been determined before, and after a nerve-racking hour of changing his speed and alternating this trajectory, he succeeded in coming within thirty feet of his objective and in matching his velocity with the floe's. The next problem was to transfer the kid from the floe to the ship.

The kid had seen the ship by this time, and was staring over his shoulder at it with glazed eyes that even through his visi-visor betrayed the space-fugue that had overtaken him. Immediately, Price began the ticklish task of sinking the anchor as close to him as possible without hitting him. He was so afraid of accidentally killing the kid that it took him nine shots to get a successful bite. He had suited himself beforehand and had attached a ten-foot life-line to his belt, so he was all set to go.

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Stepping into the decompression compartment, he closed the inner locks and released the air valve. When the outer locks automatically opened with the final outrush of air, he reached down and grasped the anchor-line at the point where it emerged from the hull and began pulling himself hand over hand toward the floe.

Reaching the surface, he tied the end of the life-line to the ring of the anchor; then he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and began cramponing and hooking his way across the brief expanse of ice and snow and dirt that separated him from the kid. All the while, the kid's eyes clung to him as though seeking by the power of their gaze alone to keep him from "falling" from the floe. And maybe it was the tenacious gaze that did the trick—who could say? It had been years since Price had used an ice-hook or worn a pair of knee-crampons. In any event, he reached the kid's side without incident, and success seemed assured. Working with one hand, he fastened his belt to the kid's; then he signaled to the kid to let go of his ice-hook and to free his crampons. He had to signal three times before the kid obeyed. After that, Price let go of his own ice-hook, freed his own crampons, and, with the kid hanging on for dear life, pulled himself back to the anchor, untied the life-line, and started back "up" the anchor-line toward the floe-charter.

His first intimation that all was not as it should be came with the realization that the anchor line had gone taut. Since it was a good forty feet in length and since the distance from the floe to the ship was less than thirty, one of two conclusions had to be drawn. Either the line had shrunk or the distance had increased. As much as he wanted to, Price couldn't bring himself to believe that the first eventuality was the case, so he found himself saddled with the second. He saw the mountainous floe bearing down on the ship then, and understood what had happened. The nine recoils of the anchor-gun had disturbed the ship's orbit just enough to cause the floe-charter to drift into the path of the nearest floe.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been a cause for alarm. The orbital velocity of the floes varied of course, diminishing toward the inner edge of the rings and increasing toward the outer edge, but in both cases the variation was cancelled out by the difference in distance traveled. The floe in question, however, was what floe-men called a "renegade". Its velocity was in the process of building up, and eventually it would build up to the

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point where the floe would either escape from the rings or break up in the attempt. At the moment, its velocity was only slightly in excess of its neighbors and the floe-charter, but the difference was enough to make a collision inevitable.

It wasn't going to be a head-on collision, though. Price saw that right away. Nor was it going to be a violent collision. The floe was going to nudge the ship in passing—that was all—and probably no great damage would be done. But unfortunately the point of contact was going to be in the region of the locks, and when it occurred the decompression compartment would fill with ice and snow and dirt, and he and the kid would be left out in the cold—unless he could gain the compartment in time to close the locks.

He doubled his efforts. Tripled them. But his movements were hampered by the kid, who, eyes shut tight against further exposure to the vicious quirks of reality, was clinging to him like a frightened girl. Even so, he managed to beat the floe to the locks, and to pull himself and the kid into the compartment before "rendezvous" took place. He grabbed the lever that controlled the locks, threw it just as the gray cliff of the floe made contact. The ship shuddered, and snow and ice and dirt began spilling into the compartment. He thrust the kid behind him and shielded him with his body; then, instinctively he stretched out his arms and tried to push back the snow and the ice and the dirt. He didn't even know it when the locks came together on his right hand. He didn't know it till, realizing that the snow and the ice and the dirt were no longer piling up around him, he stepped back and saw the blood geysering from his right wrist. Even as he looked, the blood froze and the geysering stopped; and then the whole cosmos wheeled, and he was turning, twisting . . . falling.

VI

HIS hand was throbbing again—throbbing as though the intervening fourteen years had never been. Without thinking, he looked down at it, saw the Earthlit synthi-linen tablecloth showing through the nonexistent flesh and bones. Years ago, he had been fitted with an artificial hand, but he had never been able to bring himself to use it—why, he did not wholly understand. Perhaps it was because he wanted to punish himself, wanted the evidence of his weakness to be apparent to the whole world.

When he raised his eyes, Fleurette's gentle gaze was on his face. "But how did you sur-

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vive, Aaron *pere?* All alone up there among the stars? Ronny never told me about that part. How did you get out of the rings? How did you get back to Earth?"

"We wouldn't have if it hadn't been for him. In the strict sense of the word, he had no memory; but there are some things—language for one—that a person suffering from space-fugue remembers without actual recourse to the past. Ronny remembered how to operate the controls of a decompression compartment, so he was able to get me into the ship. My space-suit was a self-sealing one, and it had sealed itself around my right arm the moment the sleeve was severed along with my hand—otherwise, of course, his efforts would have been wasted. But as it was, I came to long enough to tell him what to do next—and, just as important, what not to do. We stayed right there in the floe belt till I got some of my strength back; then, with me instructing him, he piloted the floe-charter out of the rings and headed it back toward Earth . . . It was during the trip, I guess, that I started thinking of him as my son and decided to adopt him. From the moment he took his helmet off and I got a good look at his face, I loved him. I may have loved him even before that, for all I know. I was lonely, for one thing. Over the years, the loneliness of the long runs builds up in you, and afterward you're never completely free from it. And for another thing, I was only human . . . Now there's an expression for you. Because we *are* human, we set ourselves on a pedestal and look down our noble noses on all other living creatures and use them according to the whims of our appetities and our economy. And then the minute one of our innumerable weaknesses catches up to us we excuse ourselves by saying that we're *only* human!"

"But it's true, Aaron *pere*—we *are* only human. If we weren't, we wouldn't be capable of such a monstrous self-deception. But I don't see how it applies in your case."

Silent, he looked down into his glass. It was empty. As empty as his life. But the glass, at least, could be refilled. "Waiter," he said into the table-com, and the mechman brought more wine.

PRICE raised his glass and drank. He looked into Fleurette's gray eyes. "Do you remember when you and Ronny were staying at my chalet in Colorado?" he asked. "Do you remember when you and I stepped out on the patio to look at the mountains in the moonlight?"

"Yes," she said, "I remember."

"I tried to kiss you, didn't I?"

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She shook her head. "No, Aaron. You didn't try—you did."

Dismayed, he said, "I hoped you'd slapped my face!"

"Slap your face indeed! Why, I wouldn't have dreamed of doing such a thing. It was a nice kiss, and it came from your heart. Besides—"

"Yes?" he said.

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand." She lowered her gaze to the table, then returned it to his face. "Tell me about the stars, Aaron *pere*. You've always said they were your undoing, but you've never once said why."

He tried to see into her eyes, beyond the quiet veils that hid the springtime hills and the autumn nights and the long hot summer days. But the vista was denied him. "Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning, naturally. You mentioned one time that you were impressed by the captain of a free-lance floe freighter and that after you escaped you didn't return to Earth for years. That was the beginning, wasn't it?—when you escaped."

Price sighed. "In a way," he said. The taped music raised its voice, and two of the dancers executed *grand jetés*, rising high above the floor in the tenuous lunar gravity. The Earthlight intensified, and the blues and greens of Earth herself took on deeper hues. "I was only thirty at the time of my escape," he went on. "Life on board a pirate ship—that's what a free-lance floer amounts to, you know—had made me bold, and I thought that I could do anything. At any rate, I was willing to try. So I decided to become a deep-spacer, and shipped to Mars. That's where most of the Solar starports are. Escape velocity's a drop in the bucket on Mars, and blast-off comes in the large economy-sized package. I knew that if I wanted a berth on one of the trans-C starships, Mars was the place to get it . . ."

THE first berth he had obtained was on the freighter *Bloemfontein*. She was Dutch and she was dirty, but on her he found his spacelegs, and, by skillfully questioning certain members of her crew, he was able to devise a means of circumventing the space-time equalization schedule. Her destination was Alphaghagar, and when she reached it he obtained his release by filing a land claim and applying for Alphaghagar naturalization papers. Then, when she left on the equalization trip back to Earth, he cancelled the land claim and withdrew the naturalization application and signed up on the Japanese freighter *Kiyomi*, which was in stopover at the Alphaghagar starport on its way to far Guanlago.

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On Guanlago, he obtained his release from the *Kiyomi* by filing another land claim and applying for Guanlago naturalization papers. This time, he retained the land claim and let the application go through, and after the *Kiyomi* departed he settled down ostensibly to wait out the three years that were required by Guanlagoan law for an alien to become a Guanlagoan citizen, but actually to wait out the two years and one week that would elapse before the Konfarway-Guanlago-Fargastar-Alphaghagar-Mars Express came through on its next run. Those two years, when added to the two he had lost already and the one he would lose on the trip back, brought the total to five, but there was nothing he could do about them, and anyway, five years was a small enough price to pay for fourteen.

While waiting, he made good use of his time. Thanks to the extensive book-tape library that the *Kiyomi* had contained, he was *au courant* by this time, and thanks to the same source, he was fully acquainted with the way of life of the people among whom he had taken up residence. In addition, he turned out to be a natural businessman. The Guanlagoans were a lovely gentle people among whom cleanliness was a fetish, but they lived in shabby little huts that looked like pigsties. It was taken for granted by the Terrans who had already gone into business on the planet that the reason they lived in such dwellings was that they liked to. But instinctively Price knew better. The Guanlagoans only *thought* they liked to live in pigsties, and the reason they thought so was that no one had ever taken the trouble to tempt them with superior dwellings. It was high time someone did.

He invested part of the accumulated wages of his two runs in the necessary materials and built a streamlined version of a typical Guanlagoan dwelling on the edge of his land claim where every Guanlagoan for miles around could see it. When they flocked around it like flies, he told them that they too could live in a streamlined pigsty if they wanted to, and explained to them how they could do so without financially inconveniencing themselves. They went for the idea, and Price headed for the nearest Terran bank to obtain the necessary backing. He got it, subdivided his claim, and began building in earnest. In six Guanlagoan years (480 Earth days), he was a rich man.

He expanded his activities, buying more land, and in three more Guanlagoan years he tripled his fortune. By then, the time had come for him to leave. Arranging passage on the Konfarway-Guanlago-Fargastar-Al-

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phaghagar-Mars Express had entailed pulling a good many strings and arranging re-entry to Earth after he got to Mars had entailed pulling a good many more, and the overall cost of the strings had put a sizable nick in his fortune; but there had still been enough of it left to enable him to start a new waterlanes company. On his first official trip to the rings, he had rescued Ronny. Finding him had been easy. He had simply followed the *Ganymede* at a discreet distance and moved in afterward. Returning to Earth, he had made profitable use of the experience he had acquired on the free-lance floer, and by applying futuristic techniques to his waterlanes operations he had soon left his competitors far behind him.

VII

AGAIN, two of the dancers executed lofty *grand jetés*. This time, Fleurette did not turn her head to look. "What is it that you're trying to tell me, Aaron Price?"

Silent, Price thought of the stars. Of the red stars and the blue stars and the green; of the Sol-type yellows that had given birth to planets similar to the Earth and had made it possible for intelligent life to develop in a variety of ways.

But by far the most unique way it had developed of all was on the Earth.

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! . . . In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! . . . The paragon of animals! . . .

The paragon of fools! . . .

But he was being unfair. He was using himself for a criterion, and he was not an ordinary man. Ordinary men knew enough to leave their youths alone, to refrain from using the stars as stepping stones into the past—

Yes, but ordinary men knew *their* yesterdays. And he hadn't known his.

His had been a closed book—a book he had been unable to open without the stars.

And so he had used the stars and opened it. And now he wanted to close it because he could no longer bear what was written on the pages. And the only way he could close it was to die.

And so he was going to die. With his own hands—come Earth; come tomorrow or the next day—he was going to close the book.

"What is it, Aaron Price? What is it that you're trying to say?"

He met her eyes, and knew their gentle grayness. "Space-fugue," he said. "That's what I'm trying to say. It's not like ordinary fugue. It endures for

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years, and only spacefright can bring it on and only spacefright can drive it away. And the years in between are lost. When those years are your best years, you hate to lose them. And if you're like me, you try to get them back."

HE took a deep breath, held it for a moment before setting it free. His eyes found, and focused on, his empty glass. "In a few days," he said, "the floe freighter Ronny shipped on will begin orbiting the rings. I don't know exactly how it will happen, but probably it will be something like this: The freighter will grapnel a floe and Ronny will go out with the grapnel crew and help string the reinforcing lines. He'll be as green at the job as he was before, and in additon he'll be completely out of practice. Somehow, he'll lose contact both with the floe and with the other grapnelers, and he'll become stranded on another floe and the freighter will give him up for lost and move on. Then, for the second time, spacefright will hit him, and the fourteen-year space-fugue period will be broken. And when he comes out of it, he'll instinctively think that the floe he's clinging to is the same one he was clinging to before the space-fugue period began. But it won't be."

"Look at me, Aaron Price."

"In a few hours," Price went on, "a free-lance floer will spot him, take him on board, and impress him. He'll have no memory of me and no memory of you. He'll remember absolutely nothing about the years that intervened between the moment spacefright cancelled out the first fifteen years of his life and the moment spacefright brought them back. To him it will seem as though only minutes have passed since the first freighter—the *Ganymede*—left him to die, and he'll take it for granted that he's still fifteen years old—till he sees his face in a mirror and asks someone the date. He'll know then that he's twenty-nine."

"Why don't you look at me, Aaron Price?"

His eyes did not leave his empty glass. "I had to tell you this, *jeune fille*. I didn't want to, but it would have been unfair to you if I hadn't. But no one else knows, and there's no reason why anyone ever should. In ten years time, Ronny's share in the company will go to you, and I've made arrangements for you to inherit mine. That, at least, is as it should be."

For a while he was silent, and when he spoke again some of the anguish of Oedipus was in his voice. "Men should leave time alone. When they play with time they burn their fingers and sometimes they burn their lives. A

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space-fugue victim can never really relive his lost years. He enters them like a stranger, and when he interferes with them, as he invariably must, he affects their pattern and destroys himself. He can only put new ironies into old bottles and cry out, 'Absalom, my son, myself!' And if his Absalom had a wife, he can only go to her and say, 'All the sin Absalom's face is black with, my face is black with too.' "

When he looked at her, she was crying. Around them, the Earthlight fell like gray rain, and the rain became his years. It accumulated on his shoulders and weighed them down. It made September patterns on his aging spaceburned face and added streaks of grayness to his hair. He could not see the patterns and the streaks, but he knew that they were there. And all the while, Fleurette seemed more than ever like a little girl.

He turned his eyes away.

Out of the corners of them he saw her open her purse, withdraw a small object, and lay it on the table. Still crying, she stood up, and walked toward the lifts that led to the HoneyEarth rooms.

He stared at the object, and a tightness seized him, and he had to look away. He looked out over the moonscape—over the Earthlit foothills, over the Earthlit plain. He saw the fields then, and the great green hill rising into the sky. He felt the summer sun upon his back. A summer wind sprang up and caressed his spaceburned face.

Kneeling, he began gathering the red red berries. He tasted them, and they were sweet—sweet with the sweetness of her lips. Still not quite believing, he came back from the fields, back from tomorrow, and looked at the object again. No, his eyes had not deceived him.

It was a golden key.

THE END

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PLACEMENT TEST

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by FINLAY

In a city of 100,000,000 people, there is a special need for Top Executives. Maldon had expected, ultimately, to be one. But now he couldn't even pass the exams for toll collector.

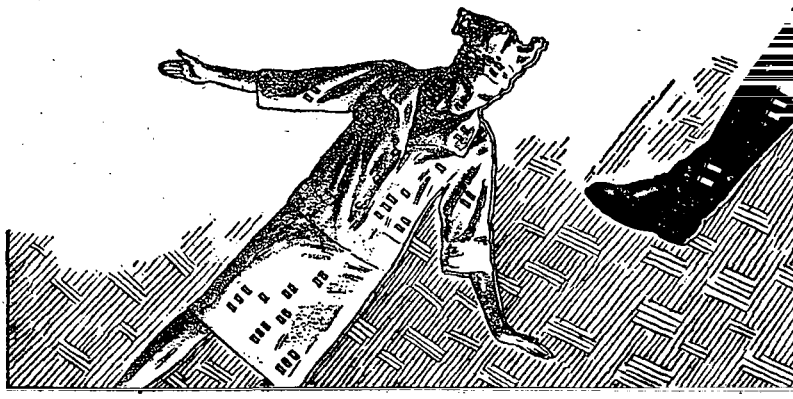
READING the paper in his hand, Mart Maldon felt his mouth go dry. Across the desk, Dean Wormwell's eyes, blurry behind thick contact lenses, strayed to his fingerwatch.

"Quota'd out?" Maldon's voice emerged as a squeak. "Three days before graduation?"

"Umm, yes, Mr. Maldon. Pity, but there you are . . ." Wormwell's jowls twitched upward briefly. "No reflection on you, of course . . ."

Maldon found his voice. "They can't do this to me—I stand number two in my class—"

Wormwell held up a pudgy palm. "Personal considerations are not involved, Mr. Maldon. Student load is based on quarterly allocated funding; funds



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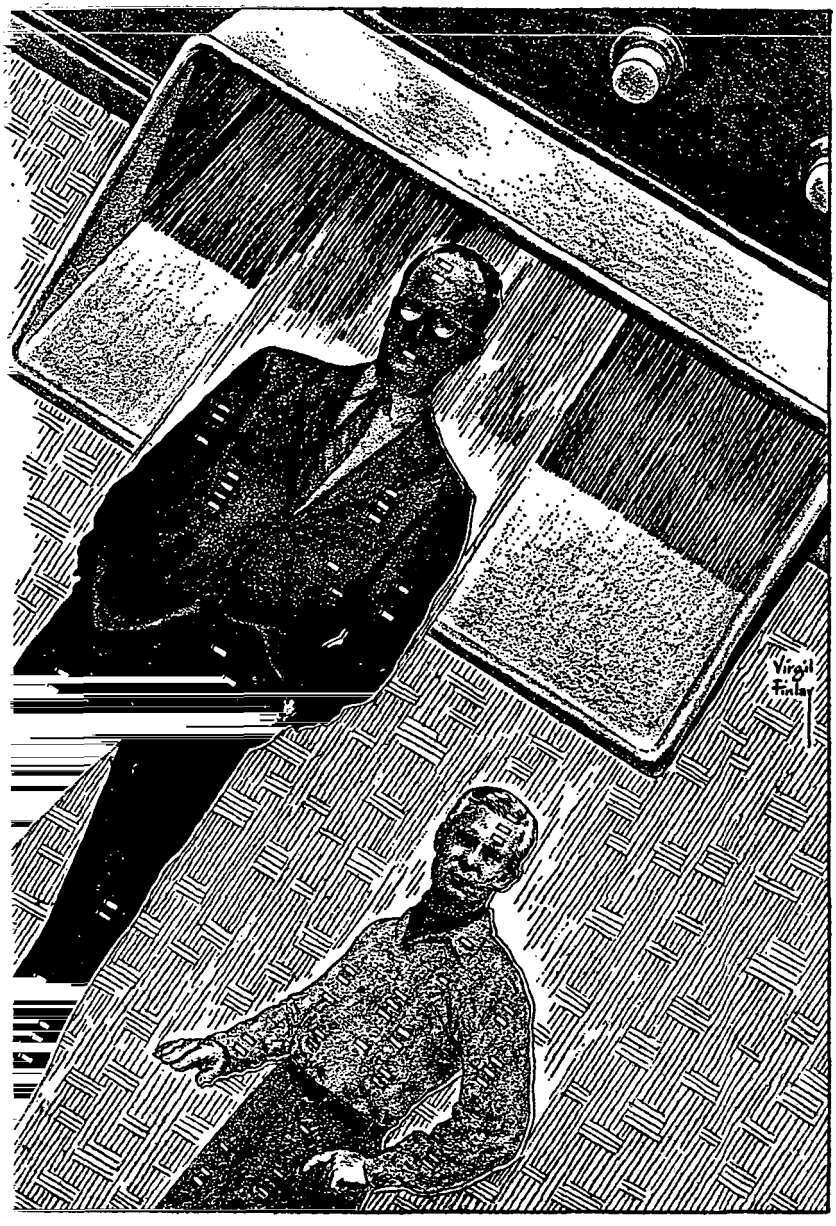

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were cut. Analogy Theory was one of the courses receiving a quota reduction—"

"An Theory . . ? But I'm a Microtronics major; that's an elective—an optional one-hour course—"

The Dean rose, stood with his fingertips on the desk. "The details are there, in the notification letter—"

"What about the detail that I waited four years for enrollment, and I've worked like a malemute for five more—"

"Mr. Maldon!" Wormwell's eyes bulged. "We work within a system! You don't expect *personal* exceptions to be made, I trust?"

"But, Dean—there's a howling need for qualified Microtronic Engineers—"

"That will do, Mr. Maldon. Turn in your student tag to the Registrar and you'll receive an appointment for Placement Testing."

"All right" Maldon's chair banged as he stood up. "I can still pass Testing and get Placed; I know as much Micro as any graduate—"

"Ah—I believe you're forgetting the limitation on non-academically qualified testees in Technical Specialty Testing. I suggest you accept a Phase Two Placement for the present . . ."

"Phase Two—But that's for unskilled labor!"

"You need work, Mr. Maldon. A city of a hundred million can't support idlers. And dormitory life is far from pleasant for an untagged man." The Dean waited, glancing pointedly at the door. Maldon silently gathered up his letter and left.

2

IT was hot in the test cubicle. Maldon shifted on the thinly-padded bench, looking over the test form:

1. In the following list of words, which word is repeated *most often*: dog, cat, cow, cat, pig . . .

2. Would you like to ask persons entering a building to show you their pass?

3. Would you like to check forms to see if the names have been entered in the correct space?

"Testing materials are on the desk," a wall-speaker said. "Use the stylus to mark the answers you think are correct. Mark only one answer to each question. You will have one hour in which to complete the test. You may start now . . ."

* * *

Back in the Hall twenty minutes later, Maldon took a seat on a bench against the wall beside a heavy-faced man who sat with one hand clutching the other as though holding a captured

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mouse. Opposite him, a nervous youth in issue coveralls shook a cigaret from a crumpled plastic pack lettered GRANYAUCK WELFARE—ONE DAILY RATION, puffed it alight, exhaled an acrid whiff of combustion retardant.

"That's a real smoke," he said in a high, rapid voice, rolling the thin, greyish cylinder between his fingers. "Half an inch of doctored tobacco and an inch and a half of filter." He grinned sourly and dropped the cigaret on the floor between his feet.

The heavy-faced man moved his head half an inch.

"That's safety first, Mac. Guys like you throw 'em around, they burn down and go out by theirself."

"Sure—if they'd make 'em half an inch shorter you could throw 'em away without lighting 'em at all."

Across the room a small man with jug ears moved along, glancing at the yellow or pink cards in the hands of the waiting men and women. He stopped, plucked a card from the hand of a narrow-faced boy with an open mouth showing crowded yellow teeth.

"You've already *passed,*" the little man said irritably. "You don't come back here anymore. Take the card and go to the place that's written on it. Here . . ." he pointed.

"Sixteen years I'm foreman of number nine gang-lathe at Philly Maintenance," the man sitting beside Mart said suddenly. He unfolded his hands, held out the right one. The tips of all four fingers were missing to the first knuckle. He put the hand away.

"When I get out of the Medicare, they classify me J-4 and send me here. And you know what?" He looked at Mart. "I can't pass the tests . . ."

"Maldon, Mart," an amplified voice said. "Report to the Monitor's desk . . ."

HE walked across to the corner where the small man sat now, deftly sorting cards. He looked up, pinched a pink card from the stack, jabbed it at Maldon. Words jumped out at him: NOT QUALIFIED.

Mart tossed the card back on the desk. "You must be mixed up," he said. "A ten year old kid could pass that test—"

"Maybe so," the monitor said sharply. "But you didn't. Next testing on Wednesday, eight A. M.—"

"Hold on a minute," Mart said. "I've had five years of Microtronics—"

The monitor was nodding. "Sure, sure. Come back Wednesday."

"You don't get the idea—"

"You're the one that doesn't get the idea, fellow." He studied Maldon for a moment. "Look,"

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he said, in a more reasonable tone. "What you want, you want to go in for Adjustment."

"Thanks for the tip," Maldon said. "I'm not quite ready to have my brains scrambled."

"Ha! A smart-alec!" The monitor pointed to his chest. "Do I look like my brains were scrambled?"

Maldon looked him over as though in doubt.

"You've been Adjusted, huh? What's it like?"

"Adjustment? There's nothing to it. You have a problem finding work, it helps you, that's all. I've seen fellows like you before. You'll never pass Phase Two testing until you do it."

"To Hell with Phase Two testing. I've registered for Tech Testing. I'll just wait."

The monitor nodded, prodding at his teeth with a pencil. "Yeah, you could wait. I remember one guy waited nine years; then he got his Adjustment and we placed him in a week."

"Nine years?" Maldon shook his head. "Who makes up these rules?"

"Who makes 'em up? Nobody! They're in the book."

Maldon leaned on the desk. "Then who writes the book? Where do I find them?"

"You mean the Chief?" the small man rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "On the next level up. But don't waste your time, friend. You can't get in there. They don't have time to argue with everybody who comes in here. It's the system—"

"Yeah," Maldon said, turning away. "So I hear."

3

MALDON rode the elevator up one floor, stepped off in a blank-walled foyer, adorned by a stone urn filled with sand, a potted yucca, framed unit citations and a polished slab door lettered PLACEMENT BOARD—AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. He tried it, found it solidly locked.

It was very quiet. Somewhere, air pumps hummed. Maldon stood by the door and waited. After ten minutes, the elevator door hissed open, disgorged a slow-moving man in blue GS coveralls with a yellow identity tag. He held the tag to a two-inch rectangle of glass beside the door. There was a click. The door slid back. Maldon moved quickly, crowding through behind the workman.

"Hey, what gives," the man said.

"It's all right, I'm a coordinator," Maldon said quickly.

"Oh." The man looked Maldon over. "Hey," he said. "Where's your I.D.?"

"It's a new experimental system. It's tattooed on my left foot."

"Hah!" the man said. "They

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always got to try out new stuff." He went on along the deep-carpeted corridor. Maldon followed slowly, reading signs over doors. He turned in under one that read CRITERIA SECTION. A girl with features compressed by fat looked up, her lower jaw working busily. She reached, pressed a button on the desk top.

"Hi," Maldon said, using a large smile. "I'd like to see the chief of the section."

The girl chewed, looking at him.

"I won't take up much of his time . . ."

"You sure won't, Buster," the girl said. The hall door opened. A uniformed man looked in. The girl waved a thumb at Maldon.

"He comes busting in," she said. "No tag, yet." The guard jerked his head toward the corridor. "Let's go . . ."

"Look, I've got to see the chief—"

The cop took his arm, helped him to the door. "You birds give me a swifty. Why don't you go to Placement like the sign says?"

"Look, they tell me I've got to have some kind of electronic lobotomy to make me dumb enough to be a receptionist or a watchman—"

"Let's watch them cracks," the guard said. He shoved Maldon out into the waiting room. "Out! And don't pull any more fasties until you got a tag, see?"

4

SITTING at a shiny imitation-oak table in the Public Library, Mart turned the pages of a booklet titled *Adjustment Fits the Man to the Job.*

". . . neuroses arising from job tension," he read at random. "Thus, the Adjusted worker enjoys the deep-down satisfaction which comes from Doing a Job, free from conflict-inducing nonproductive impulses and the distractions of feckless speculative intellectual activity . . ."

Mart rose and went to the librarian's console.

"I want something a little more objective," he said in a hoarse library whisper. "This is nothing but propaganda."

The librarian paused in her button-punching to peer at the booklet. "That's put out by the Placement people themselves," she said sharply. She was a jawless woman with a green tag against a ribby chest and thin, black-dyed hair. "It contains all the information anyone needs."

"Not quite; it doesn't tell who grades Placement tests and decides who gets their brain poached."

"Well!" the woman's button chin drew in. "I'm sure I never heard Adjustment referred to in *those* terms before!"

"Do you have any technical information on it—or anything

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on Placement policy in general?"

"Certainly not for indescriminate use by—" she searched for a word. "—browsers!"

"Look, I've got a right to know what goes on in my own town, I hope," Mart said, forgetting to whisper. "What is it, a conspiracy . . . ?"

"You're paranoic!" The librarian's lean fingers snatched the pamphlet from Maldon's hand. "You're all alike! You come stamping in here—without even a tag—a great healthy creature like you—" her voice cut like a sheet-metal file. Heads turned. "You're a troublemaker."

"All I want is information—"

"—living in luxury on MY tax money! You ought to be—"

5

IT was an hour later. In a ninth-floor corridor of the GRANYAUCK TIMES HERALD building, Mart leaned against a wall, mentally rehearsing speeches. A stout man emerged from a door lettered EDITOR IN CHIEF. Mart stepped forward to intercept him.

"Pardon me, sir. I have to see you . . ."

Sharp blue eyes under wild-growing brows darted at Maldon.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I have a story for you. It's about the Placement procedure."

"Whoa, buddy. Who are you?"

"My name's Maldon. I'm an Applied Tech graduate—almost—but I can't get placed in Microtronics. I don't have a tag—and only way to get one is to get a job—but first I have to let the government operate on my brains—"

"Hmmmp!" The man looked Maldon up and down, started on.

"Listen!" Maldon caught at the portly man's arm. "They're making idiots out of intelligent people so they can do work you could train a chimp to do, and if you ask any questions—"

"All right, Mac . . ." A voice behind Maldon growled. A large hand took him by the shoulder, propelled him toward the walk-away entrance, urged him through the door. He straightened his coat, looked back. A heavy-set man with a pink card in a plastic cover clipped to his collar dusted his hands, looking satisfied.

"Don't come around lots," he called cheerfully as the door slammed.

6

HI, Glamis," Mart said to the small, neat woman behind the small, neat desk. She smiled nervously, straightened the mathematically precise stack of papers before her.

"Mart, it's lovely to see you

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again, of course . . ." her eyes went to the blank place where his tag should have been. "But you really should have gone to your assigned SocAd Advisor—"

"I couldn't get an appointment until January." He pulled a chair around to the desk and sat down. "I've left school. I went in for Phase Two Placement testing this morning. I flunked."

"Oh . . . I'm so sorry, Mart." She arranged a small smile on her face. "But you can go back on Wednesday—"

"Uh-huh. And then on Friday, and then the following Monday—"

"Why, Mart, I'm sure you'll do better next time," the girl said brightly. She flipped through the pages of a calendar pad. "Wednesday's testing is for . . . ah . . . Vehicle Positioning Specialists, Instrumentation Inspectors, Sanitary Facility Supervisors—"

"Uh-huh. Toilet Attendants," Mart said. "Meter Readers—"

"There are others," Glamis went on hastily. "Traffic flow coordinators—"

"Pushing stop-light buttons on the turnpike. But it doesn't matter what the job titles are. I can't pass the tests."

"*Why*, Mart . . . Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that to get the kind of jobs that are open you have to be a nice, steady moron. And if you don't happen to qualify as such, they're prepared to make you into one."

"Mart, you're exaggerating! The treatment merely slows the synaptic response time slightly—and its effects can be reversed at any time. People of exceptional qualities are needed to handle the type work—"

"How can I fake the test results, Glamis? I need a job—unless I want to get used to Welfare coveralls and two T rations a day."

"Mart! I'm shocked that you'd suggest such a thing! Not that it would work. You can't fool the Board that easily—"

"Then fix it so I go in for Tech testing; you know I can pass."

She shook her head. "Heavens, Mart, Tech Testing is all done at Central Personnel in City Tower—Level Fifty. Nobody goes up there without at least a blue tag—" She frowned sympathetically. "You should simply have your adjustment, and—"

Maldon looked surprised. "You really expect me to go down there and have them cut my I. Q. down to 80 so I can get a job shovelling garbage?"

"Really, Mart; you can't expect society to adjust to *you*. You have to adjust to it."

"Look, I can punch commuters' tickets just as well as if I were stupid. I could—"

Glamis shook her head. "No,

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you couldn't, Mart. The Board knows what it's doing." She lowered her voice. "I'll be perfectly frank with you. These jobs *MUST* be filled. But they can't afford to put perceptive, active minds on rote tasks. There'd only be trouble. They need people who'll be contented and happy punching tickets."

Mart sat pulling at his lower lip. "All right, Glamis. Maybe I will go in for Adjustment . . ."

"Oh, wonderful, Mart." She smiled. "I'm *sure* you'll be happier—"

"But first, I want to know more about it. I want to be sure they aren't going to make a permanent idiot out of me."

She tsked, handed over a small folder from a pile on the corner of the desk.

"This will tell you—"

He shook his head. "I saw that. It's just a throwaway for the public. I want to know how the thing works; circuit diagrams, technical specs."

"Why, Mart, I don't have anything of that sort—and even if I did—"

"You can get 'em. I'll wait."

"Mart, I *do* want to help you . . . but . . . what . . . ?"

"I'm not going in for Adjustment until I know something about it," he said flatly. "I want to put my mind at ease that they're not going to burn out my cortex."

Glamis nibbled her upper lip. "Perhaps I *could* get something from Central Files." She stood. "Wait here; I won't be long."

She was back in five minutes carrying a thick book with a cover of heavy manila stock on which were the words, *GSM 8765-89. Operation and Maintenance, EET Mark II.* Underneath, in smaller print, was a notice:

This Field Manual for Use of Authorized Personnel Only.

"Thanks, Glamis." Mart riffled the pages, glimpsed fine print and intricate diagrams. "I'll bring it back tomorrow." He headed for the door.

"Oh, you can't take it out of the office! You're not even *supposed* to *look* at it!"

"You'll get it back." He winked and closed the door on her worried voice.

7

THE cubicle reminded Mart of the one at the Placement center, three days earlier, except that it contained a high, narrow cot in place of a desk and chair. A damp-looking attendant in a white coat flipped a wall switch, twiddled a dial.

"Strip to your waist, place your clothing and shoes in the basket, remove all metal objects from your pockets, no watches or other jewelry must be worn," he

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recited in a rapid monotone. "When you are ready, lie down on your back—" he slapped the cot— "hands at your sides, breathe deeply, do not touch any of the equipment. I will return in approximately five minutes. Do not leave the stall." He whisked the curtain aside and was gone.

Mart slipped a flat plastic tool kit from his pocket, opened it out, picked the largest screwdriver, and went to work on the metal panel cover set against the wall. He lifted it off and looked in at a maze of junction blocks, vari-colored wires, bright screwheads, fuses, tiny condensers.

He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket, compared it to the circuits before him. The large black lead, here . . . He put a finger on it. And the matching red one, leading up from the 30 MFD condenser . . .

With a twist, he freed the two connectors, reversed them, tightened them back in place. Working quickly, he snipped wires, fitted jumpers in place, added a massive resistor from his pocket. There; with luck, the check instruments would give the proper readings now—but the current designed to lightly scorch his synapses would flow harmlessly round and round within the apparatus. He clapped the cover back in place, screwed it down, and had just pulled off his shirt when the attendant thrust his head inside the curtains.

"Let's go, let's get those clothes off and get on the cot," he said, and disappeared.

Maldon emptied his pockets, pulled off his shoes, stretched out on the cot. A minute or two ticked past. There was an odor of alcohol in the air. The curtain jumped aside. The round-faced attendant took his left arm, swiped a cold tuft of cotton across it, held a hypo-spray an inch from the skin, and depressed the plunger. Mart felt a momentary sting.

"You've been given a harmless soporific," the attendant said tonelessly. "Just relax, don't attempt to change the position of the headset or chest contacts after I have placed them in position, are you beginning to feel drowsy . . . ?"

Mart nodded. A tingling had begun in his fingertips; his head seemed to be inflating slowly. There was a touch of something cold across his wrists, then his ankles, pressure against his chest . . .

"Do not be alarmed, the retraint is for your own protection, relax and breathe deeply, it will hasten the effects of the soporific . . ." The voice echoed, fading and swelling. For a moment, the panicky thought came to Mart that perhaps he had made a mistake, that the modi-

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fied apparatus would send a lethal charge through his brain . . . Then that thought was gone with all the others, lost in a swirling as of a soft green mist.

8

HE was sitting on the side of the cot, and the attendant was offering him a small plastic cup. He took it, tasted the sweet liquid, handed it back.

"You should drink this," the attendant said, "It's very good for you."

Mart ignored him. He was still alive; and the attendant appeared to have noticed nothing unusual. So far, so good. He glanced at his hand. *One, two, three, four, five* . . . He could still count. *My name is Mart Maldon, age twenty-eight, place of residence, Welfare Dorm 69, Wing Two, nineteenth floor, room 1906* . . .

His memory seemed to be OK. *Twenty-seven times eighteen is . . . four hundred and eighty-six* . . .

He could still do simple arithmetic.

"Come on, fellow, drink the nice cup, then put your clothes on."

He shook his head, reached for his shirt, then remembered to move slowly, uncertainly, like a moron ought to. He fumbled clumsily with his shirt . . .

The attendant muttered, put the cup down, snatched the shirt, helped Mart into it, buttoned it for him.

"Put your stuff in your pockets, come on, that's a good fellow . . ."

He allowed himself to be led along the corridor, smiling vaguely at people hurrying past. In the processing room, a starched woman back of a small desk stamped papers, took his hand and impressed his thumbprint on them, slid them across the desk.

"Sign your name here . . ." she pointed. Maldon stood gaping at the paper. There was absolutely no sign of comprehension.

"Write your name here!" She tapped the paper impatiently. Maldon reached up and wiped his nose with a forefinger, letting his mouth hang open.

The woman looked past him. "A Nine-oh-one," she snapped. "We can't be bothered. Take him back—"

Maldon grabbed the pen and wrote his name in large, scrawling letters. The woman snapped the form apart, thrust one sheet at him.

"Uh, I was thinking," he explained, folding the paper clumsily.

"Next!" the woman snapped, waving him on. He nodded submissively and shuffled slowly to the door.

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9

THE Placement monitor looked at the form Maldon had given him. He looked up, smiling. "Well, so you finally wised up. Good boy. And today you got a nice score. We're going to be able to place you. You like bridges, hah?"

Maldon hesitated, then nodded.

"Sure you like bridges. Out in the open air. You're going to be an important man. When the cars come up, you lean out and see that they put the money in the box. You get to wear a uniform . . ." The small man rambled on, filling out forms. Maldon stood by, looking at nothing.

"Here you go. Now, you go where it says right here, see? Just get on the cross-town shuttle, right outside on this level, the one with the big number nine. You know what a nine is, OK?"

Maldon blinked, nodded. The clerk frowned. "Sometimes I think them guys overdo a good thing. But you'll get to feeling better in a few days; you'll sharpen up, like me. Now, you go on over there, and they'll give you your I.D. and your uniform and put you to work. OK?"

"Uh, thanks . . ." Maldon crossed the wide room, pushed through the turnstile, emerged into the late-afternoon sunlight on the fourth-level walkaway. The glare panel by the shuttle entrance read NEXT—9. He thrust his papers into his pocket and ran for it.

10

MALDON left his Dormitory promptly at eight the next morning, dressed in his threadbare Student-issue suit, carrying the heavy duffel-bag of Port Authority uniforms which had been issued to him the day before. His new yellow tag was pinned prominently to his lapel.

He took a cargo car to street level, caught an uptown car, dropped off in the run-down neighborhood of second-hand stores centered around Fifth Avenue and Forty-fifth Street. He picked a shabby establishment barricaded behind racks of dowdy garments, stepped into a long, dim-lit room smelling of naptha and mouldy wool. Behind a counter, a short man with a circlet of fuzz above his ears and a vest hanging open over a tight-belted paunch looked him over. Mart hoisted the bag up, opened it, dumped the clothing out onto the counter. The paunchy man followed the action with his eyes.

"What'll you give me for this stuff?" Mart said.

The man behind the counter prodded the dark blue tunic, put a finger under the light blue

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trousers, rubbed the cloth. He leaned across the counter, glanced toward the door, squinted at Mart's badge. His eyes flicked to Mart's face, back to the clothing. He spread his hands.

"Five credits."

"For all of it? It's worth a hundred anyway."

The man glanced sharply at Maldon's face, back at his tag, frowning.

"Don't let the tag throw you," Maldon said. "It's stolen—just like the rest of the stuff."

"Hey." The paunchy man thrust his lips out. "What kinda talk is that? I run a respectable joint. What are you, some kinda cop?"

"I haven't got any time to waste," Maldon said. "There's nobody listening. Let's get down to business. You can strip off the braid and buttons and—"

"Ten credits, my top offer," the man said in a low voice. "I gotta stay alive, ain't I? Any bum can get outfitted free at the Welfare; who's buying my stuff?"

"I don't know. Make it twenty."

"Fifteen; it's robbery."

"Throw in a set of Maintenance coveralls, and it's a deal."

"I ain't got the real article, but close . . ."

Ten minutes later, Mart left the store wearing a grease-stained coverall with the cuffs turned up, the yellow tag clipped to the breast pocket.

11

THE girl at the bleached-driftwood desk placed austerely at the exact center of the quarter-acre of fog-grey rug stared at Maldon distastefully.

"I know of no trouble with the equipment—" she started in a lofty tone.

"Look, sister, I'm in the plumbing line; you run your dictyper." Maldon swung a greasy tool box around by the leather strap as though he were about to lower it to the rug. "They tell me the Exec gym, Level 9, City Tower, that's where I go. Now, you want to tell me where the steam room is, or do I go back and file a beef with the Union . . ?"

"Next time come up the service shaft, Clyde!" she jabbed at a button; a panel whoosed aside across the room. "Men to the right, women to the left, co-ed straight ahead. Take your choice."

He went along the tiled corridor, passed steam-frosted doors. The passage turned right, angled left again. Mart pushed through a door, looked around at chromium and red plastic benches, horses, parallel bars, racks of graduated weights. A fat man in white shorts lay on the floor,

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half-heartedly pedaling his feet in the air. Mart crossed the room, tried another door.

Warm, sun-colored light streamed through an obscure-glass ceiling. Tropical plants in tubs nodded wide leaves over a mat of grass-green carpet edging a turquoise-tiled pool with chrome railings. Two brown-skinned men in brief trunks and sun-glasses sprawled on inflated rafts. There was a door to the right lettered EXECUTIVE DRESSING ROOM—MEMBERS ONLY. Mart went to it, stepped inside.

Tall, ivory-colored lockers lined two walls, with a wide, padded bench between them. Beyond, bright shower heads winked in a darkened shower room. Maldon put the tool box on the bench, opened it, took out a twelve-inch prybar, looked around at the lockers. A monogrammed cigaret butt lay on the floor before one; he tried it first.

By levering at the top of the tall locker door, he was able to bulge it out sufficiently to see the long metal strip on the back of the door which secured it. He went back to the tool box, picked out a slim pair of pincers; with them he gripped the locking strip, levered up; the door opened with a sudden clang. The locker was empty.

He tried the next; it contained a handsome pale tan suit which would have fitted him nicely at the age of twelve. He went to the next locker . . .

FOUR lockers later, a door popped open on a dark maroon suit of expensive-looking polyon, a pair of plain scarlet shoes, a crisp pink shirt. Mart checked quickly. There was a wallet stuffed with ten-credit notes, a club membership card, and a blue I. D. with a gold alligator clip. Mart left the money on the shelf, rolled the clothing and stuffed it into the tool box, made for the door. It swung open and the smaller of the two sun bathers pushed past him with a sharp glance. Mart walked quickly around the end of the pool, stepped into the corridor. At the far end of it, the girl from the desk stood talking emphatically to a surprised-looking man. Their eyes turned toward Mart. He pushed through the first door on the left into a room with a row of white-sheeted tables, standing lamps with wide reflectors, an array of belted and rollered equipment. A vast bulk of a man with hairy forearms and a bald head, wearing tight white leotard and white sneakers folded a newspaper and looked up from his bench, wobbling a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. There was a pink tag on this chest.

"Uh . . . showers?" Mart inquired. The fat man nodded to-

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ward a door behind him. Mart stepped to it, found himself in a long room studded with shower-heads and control knobs. There was no other door out. He turned back, bumped into the fat man in the doorway.

"So somebody finally decided to do something about the leak," he said around the tooth-pick. "Three months since I phoned it in. You guys take your time, hah?"

"I've got to go back for my tools," Mart said, starting past him. The fat man blocked him without moving. "So what's in the box?"

"Ah, they're the wrong tools . . ." He tried to sidle past. The big man took the toothpick from his mouth, frowned at it.

"You got a pipe wrench, ain't you? You got crescents, a screwdriver. What else you need to fix a lousy leak?"

"Well, I need my sprog-depressor," Mart said, "and my destrafficator rings, and possibly a marpilizer or two . . ."

"How come you ain't got—what you said—in there." The fat man eyed the tool box. "Ain't that standard equipment?"

"Yes, indeed—but I only have a right-hand one, and—"

"Let's have a look—" A fat hand reached for the tool-kit. Mart backed.

"—but I might be able to make it work," he finished. He glanced around the room. "Which one was it?"

"That third needle-battery on the right. You can see the drip. I'm tryna read, it drives me nuts."

MART put the tool-box down. "If you don't mind, it makes me nervous to work in front of an audience . . ."

The fat man grunted and withdrew. Mart opened the box, took out a wrench, began loosening a wide hex-sided locking ring. Water began to dribble, then spurt. Mart went to the door, flung it open.

"Hey, you didn't tell me the water wasn't turned off . . ."

"Huh?"

"You'll have to turn off the master valve; hurry up, before the place is flooded!"

The fat man jumped up, headed for the door.

"Stand by it, wait five minutes, then turn it back on!" Mart called after him. The door banged. Mart hauled the tool box out into the massage room, quickly stripped off the grimy coverall. His eye fell on a rack of neatly-packaged underwear, socks, toothbrushes, combs. He helped himself to a set, removed the last of the Welfare issue clothing—

A shout sounded outside the door, running feet. The door burst open.

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"Where's Charlie? Some rascal's stolen my clothing . . .!"

Mart grabbed up a towel, dropped it over his head and rubbed vigorously, humming loudly, his back to the newcomer.

"The workmen—there's his tool-box!"

Mart whirled, pulled the towel free, snatched the box from the hand of the invader, with a hearty shove sent him reeling into the locker room. He slammed the door, turned the key and dropped it down a drain. The shouts from inside were barely audible. He wrapped the towel around himself and dashed into the hall. There were people, some in white, others in towels or street clothes, all talking at once.

"Down there!" Mart shouted, pointing vaguely. "Don't let him get away!" He plunged through the press, along the hall. Doors opened and shut.

"Hey, what's he doing with a tool-box?" someone shouted. Mart whirled, dived through a door, found himself in a dense, hot fog. A woman with pink skin beaded with perspiration and a towel wrapped turban-fashion around her head stared at him.

"What are you doing in here? Co-ed is the next room along."

Mart gulped and dived past her, slammed through a plain door, found himself in a small room stacked with cartons. There was another door in the opposite wall. He went through it, emerged in a dusty hall. Three doors down, he found an empty store-room.

Five minutes later he emerged, dressed in a handsome maroon suit. He strode briskly along to a door marked EXIT, came out into a carpeted foyer with a rank of open elevator doors. He stepped into one. The yellow-tagged attendant whooshed the door shut.

"Tag, sir?" Maldon showed the blue I. D. The operator nodded.

"Down, sir?"

"No," Mart said. "Up."

12

HE stepped out into the cool silence of Level Fifty.

"Which way to the class One Testing Rooms?" he asked briskly.

The operator pointed. The door-lined corridor seemed to stretch endlessly.

"Going to try for the Big One, eh, sir?" the operator said. "Boy, you couldn't hire me to take on them kind of jobs. Me, I wouldn't want the responsibility." The closing door cut off the view of his wagging head.

Maldon set off, trying to look purposeful. Somewhere on this level were the Central Personnel Files, according to Glamis. It shouldn't be too hard to find

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them. After that . . . well, he could play it by ear.

A menu-board directory at a cross-corridor a hundred yards from his starting-point indicated PERSONNEL ANALYSIS to the right. Mart followed the passage, passed open doors through which he caught glimpses of soft colors, air-conditioner grills, potted plants, and immaculate young women with precise hair styles sitting before immense key boards or behind bare desks. Chaste lettering on doors read PROGRAMMING; REQUIREMENTS; DATA EXTRAPOLATION—PHASE III . . .

Ahead, Maldon heard a clattering, rising in volume as he approached a wide double door. He peered through glass, saw a long room crowded with massive metal cases ranked in rows, floor to ceiling. Men in tan dust smocks moved in the aisles, referring to papers in their hands, jotting notes, punching keys set in the consoles spaced at intervals on the giant cabinets. At a desk near the door, a man with a wide, sad mouth and a worried expression looked up, caught sight of Mart. It was no time to hesitate. He pushed through the door.

"Morning," he said genially over the busy sound of the data machines. "I'm looking for Central Personnel. I wonder if I'm in the right place?"

The sad man opened his mouth, then closed it. He had a green tag attached to the collar of his open-necked shirt.

"You from Special Actions?" he said doubtfully.

"Aptical *foddering*," Maldon said pleasantly. "I'd never been over here in Personnel Analysis, so I said, what the heck, I'll just run over myself." He was holding a relaxed smile in place, modelled after the one Dean Wormwell had customarily worn when condescending to students.

"Well, sir, this is Data Processing; what you probably want is Files . . ."

Mart considered quickly. "Just what is the scope of the work you do here?"

The clerk got to his feet. "We maintain the Master Personnel Cards up-to-date," he started, then paused. "Uh, could I just see that I. D., sir?"

Maldon let the smile cool a degree or two, flashed the blue card; the clerk craned as Mart tucked the tag away.

"Now," Mart went on briskly, "Suppose you just start at the beginning and give me a rundown." He glanced at a wall-clock. "Make it a fast briefing. I'm a little pressed for time."

The clerk hitched at his belt, looked around. "Well, sir, let's start over here . . .

TEN minutes later, they stood before a high, glass-fronted

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housing inside which row on row of tape reels nestled on shiny rods; bright-colored plastic fittings of complex shape jammed the space over, under and behind each row.

". . . it's all completely cybernetic-governed, of course," the clerk was saying. "We process an average of four hundred and nineteen thousand personnel actions per day, with an average relay-delay of not over four micro-seconds."

"What's the source of your input?" Mart inquired in the tone of one dutifully asking the routine questions.

"All the Directorates feed their data in to us—"

"Placement Testing?" Mart asked idly.

"Oh, sure, that's our biggest single data input."

"Including Class Five and Seven categories, for example?"

The clerk nodded. "Eight through Two. Your Tech categories are handled separately, over in Banks Y and Z. There . . ." He pointed to a pair of red-painted cabinets.

"I see. That's where the new graduates from the Technical Institutions are listed, eh?"

"Right, sir. They're scheduled out from there to Testing alphabetically, and then ranked by score for Grading, Classification, and Placement."

Mart nodded and moved along the aisle. There were two-inch high letters stencilled on the frames of the data cases. He stopped before a large letter B.

"Let's look at a typical record," Mart suggested. The clerk stepped to the console, pressed a button. A foot-square screen glowed. Print popped into focus on it: BAJUL, FELIX B. 654-8734-099-B1 /age 37. . . .

Below the heading was an intricate pattern of dots.

"May I?" Mart reached for the button, pushed it. There was a click and the name changed: BAKARSKI, HYMAN A.

He looked at the meaningless code under the name.

"I take it each dot has a significance?"

"In the first row, you have the physical profile; that's the first nine spaces. Then psych, that's the next twenty-one. Then . . ." He lectured on. Mart nodded.

". . . educational profile, right here . . ."

"Now," Mart cut in. "Suppose there were an error—say in the median scores attained by an individual. How would you correct that?"

THE clerk frowned, pulling down the corners of his mouth into well-worn grooves.

"I don't mean on your part, of course," Mart said hastily. "But I imagine that the data processing equipment occasionally drops

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a decimal, eh?" He smiled understandingly.

"Well, we do get maybe one or two a year—but there's no harm done. On the next run-through, the card's automatically kicked out."

"So you don't . . . ah . . . make corrections?"

"Well, only when a Change Entry comes through."

The clerk twirled knobs; the card moved aside, up; a single dot swelled on the screen, resolved into a pattern of dots.

"Say it was on this item; I'd just wipe that code, and overprint the change. Only takes a second, and—"

"Suppose, for example, you wanted this record corrected to show graduation from a Tech Institute?"

"Well, that would be this symbol here; eighth row, fourth entry. The code for technical specialty would be in the 900 series. You punch it in here." He indicated rows of colored buttons. "Then the file's automatically transferred to the V bank."

"Well, this has been a fascinating tour," Mart said. "I'll make it a point to enter an appropriate commendation in the files."

The sad-faced man smiled wanly. "Well, I try to do my job . . ."

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll just stroll around and watch for a few minutes before I rush along to my conference."

"Well, nobody's supposed to be back here in the stacks except—"

"That's quite all right. I'd prefer to look it over alone." He turned his back on the clerk and strolled off. A glance back at the end of the stack showed the clerk settling into his chair, shaking his head.

MART moved quickly past the ends of the stacks, turned in at the third row, followed the letters through O, N, stopped before M. He punched a button, read the name that flashed on the screen: MAJONOVITCH.

He tapped at the key; names flashed briefly: MAKISS . . . MALACHI . . . MALDON, SALLY . . . MALDON, MART—

He looked up. A technician was standing at the end of the stack, looking at him. He nodded.

"Quite an apparatus you have here . . ."

The technician said nothing. He wore a pink tag and his mouth was open half an inch. Mart looked away, up at the ceiling, down at the floor, back at the technician. He was still standing, looking. Abruptly his mouth closed with a decisive snap; he started to turn toward the clerk's desk—

Mart reached for the control knobs, quickly dialled for the

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eighth row, entry four; the single dot shifted into position, enlarged. The technician, distracted by the sudden move, turned, came hurrying along the aisle.

"Hey, nobody's supposed to mess with the—"

"Now, my man," Mart said in a firm tone. "Answer each question in as few words as possible. You will be graded on promptness and accuracy of response. What is the number of digits in the Technical Specialty series—the 900 group?"

Taken aback, the technician raised his eyebrows, said "Three—but—"

"And what is the specific code for Microtronics Engineer—cum Laude?"

There was a sudden racket from the door. Voices were raised in hurried inquiry. The clerk's voice replied. The technician stood undecided, scratching his head. Mart jabbed at the colored buttons: 901 . . . 922 . . . 936 dozen three-digit Specialties into his record at random.

From the corner of his eye he saw a light blank on one of the red-painted panels; his record was being automatically transferred to the technically Qualified files. He poked the button which whirled his card from the screen and turned, stepped off toward the far end of the room. The technician came after him.

"Hey there, what card was that you were messing with . . . ?"

"No harm done," Mart reassured him. "Just correcting an error. You'll have to excuse me now; I've just remembered a pressing engagement . . ."

"I better check; what card was it?"

"Oh—just one picked at random."

"But . . . we got a hundred million cards in here . . ."

"Correct!" Malden said. "So far you're batting a thousand. Now, we have time for just one more question: is there another door out of here?"

"Mister, you better wait a minute till I see the super—"

Mart spotted two unmarked doors, side by side. "Don't bother; what would you tell him? That there was, just possibly, a teentsy weentsy flaw in one of your hundred million cards? I'm sure that would upset him." He pulled the nearest door open. The technician's mouth worked frantically.

"Hey, that's"—he started.

"Don't call us—we'll call you!" Mart stepped past the door; it swung to behind him. Just before it closed, he saw that he was standing in a four-foot by six foot closet. He whirled, grabbed for the door; there was no knob on the inside. It shut with a decisive click!

He was alone in pitch darkness.

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MALDON felt hastily over the surfaces of the walls, found them bare and featureless. He jumped, failed to touch the ceiling. Outside he heard the technician's voice, shouting. At any moment he would open the door and that would be that . . .

Mart went to his knees, explored the floor. It was smooth. Then his elbow cracked against metal—

He reached, found a grill just above floor level, two feet wide and a foot high. A steady flow of cool air came from it. There were screw-heads at each corner. Outside, the shouts continued. There were answering shouts.

Mart felt over his pockets, brought out a coin, removed the screws. The grill fell forward into his hands. He laid it aside, started in head-first, encountered a sharp turn just beyond the wall. He wriggled over on his side, pushed hard, negotiated the turn by pulling with his hands pressed against the sides of the metal duct. There was light ahead, cross-hatched by a grid. He reached it, peered into a noisy room where great panels loomed, their faces a solid maze of dials and indicator lights. He tried the grill. It seemed solid. The duct made a right-angle turn here. Maldon worked his way around the bend, found that the duct widened six inches. When his feet were in position, he swung a kick at the grill. The limited space made it awkward; he kicked again and again; the grill gave, one more kick and it clattered into the room beyond. Mart struggled out through the opening.

The room was brightly lit, deserted. There were large printed notices here and there on the wall warning of danger. Mart turned, re-entered the duct, made his way back to the closet. The voices were still audible outside the door. He reached through the opening, found the grill, propped it in position as the door flew open. He froze, waiting. There was a moment of silence.

"But," the technician's voice said, "I tell you the guy walked into the utility closet here like he was boarding a rocket for Paris! I didn't let the door out of my sight, that's why I was standing back at the back and yelling, like you was chewing me out for . . ."

"You must have made an error; it must have been the other door there . . ."

The door closed. Mart let out a breath. Now perhaps he'd have a few minutes' respite in which to figure a route off Level Fifty.

13

HE prowled the lanes between the vast cybernetic machines, turned a corner, almost collided with a young woman

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with red-blonde hair, dark eyes and a pouting red mouth which opened in a surprised O.

"You shouldn't be in here," she said, motioning over her shoulder with a pencil. "All examinees must remain in the examination room until the entire battery of tests have been completed."

"I . . . ah . . ."

"I know," the girl said, less severely. "Four hours at a stretch. It's awful. But you'd better go back in now before somebody sees you."

He nodded, smiled, and moved toward the door she had indicated. He looked back. She was studying the instrument dials, not watching him. He went past the door and tried the next. It opened and he stepped into a small, tidy office. A large-eyed woman with tightly dressed brown hair looked up from a desk adorned by a single rosebud in a slim vase and a sign reading PLACEMENT OFFICER. Her eyes went to a wall clock.

"You're too late for today's testing, I'm afraid," she said. "You'll have to return on Wednesday; that's afternoon testing. Mondays we test in the morning." She smiled sympathetically. "Quite a few make that mistake."

"Oh," Mart said. "Ah . . . Couldn't I start late?"

The woman was shaking her head. "Oh, it wouldn't be possible. The first results are already coming in . . ." She nodded toward a miniature version of the giant machines in the next room. A humming and clicking sounded briefly from it. She tapped a key on her desk. There was a sharp buzz from the small machine. He gazed at the apparatus. Again it clicked and hummed. Again she tapped, eliciting another buzz.

Mart stood, considering. His only problem now was to leave the building without attracting attention. His record had been altered to show his completion of a Technical Specialty; twelve of them, in fact. It might have been better if he had settled for one. Someone might notice—

"I see you're admiring the Profiler," the woman said. "It's a very compact model, isn't it? Are you a Cyberneticist, by any chance?"

Maldon started. "No . . ."

"What name is that? I'll check your file over to see that everything's in order for Wednesday's testing."

Mart took a deep breath. This was no time to panic . . . "Maldon," he said. "Mart Maldon."

THE woman swung an elaborate telephone-dial-like instrument out from a recess, dialed a long code, then sat back. Ten seconds passed. With a click,

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a small panel on the desk-top glowed. The woman leaned forward, reading. She looked up.

"Why, Mr. Maldon! You have a remarkable record! I don't believe I've ever encountered a testee with such a wide—and varied—background!"

"Oh," Mart said, with a weak smile. "It was nothing . . ."

"Eidetics, Cellular Psychology, Autonomics . . ."

"I hate narrow specialization," Mart said.

". . . Cybernetics Engineering—why, Mr. Maldon, you were teasing me!"

"Well . . ." Mart edged toward the door.

"My, we'll certainly be looking forward to seeing your test results, Mr. Maldon! And Oh! Do let me show you the new Profiler you were admiring." She hopped up, came round the desk. "It's such a time saver—and of course, saves a vast number of operations within the master banks. Now, when the individual testee depresses his COMPLETED key, his test pattern in binary form is transferred directly to this unit for recognition. It's capable of making over a thousand yes-no comparisons per second, profiling the results in decimal terms and recoding them into the master record, without the necessity for activating a single major sequence within the master—and, of course, every activation costs the taxpayer seventy-nine credits!"

"Very impressive," Mart said. If he could interrupt the flow of information long enough to ask a few innocent-sounding directions . . .

A discreet buzzer sounded. The woman depressed a key on the desk communicator.

"Miss Frinkles, could you step in a moment? There's a report of a madman loose in the building . . ."

"Good Heavens!" She looked at Mart as she slipped through the door. "Please, do excuse me a moment . . ."

MART waited half a minute, started to follow; a thought struck him. He looked at the Profiler. All test results were processed through this little device; what if . . .

A quick inspection indicated that the apparatus was a close relative of the desk-top units used at Applied Tech in the ill-fated Analogy Theory class. The input, in the form of a binary series established by the testee's answers to his quiz, was compared with the master pattern for the specialty indicated by the first three digits of the signal. The results were translated into a profile, ready for transmittal to the Master Files.

This was almost too simple . . .

Mart pressed a lever at the back

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of the housing, lifted it off. Miss Frinkles had been right about this being a new model; most of the circuitry was miniaturized and built up into replacable sub-assemblies. What he needed was a set of tools . . .

He tried Miss Frinkles' desk, turned up a nail file and two bobby pins. It wouldn't be necessary to fake an input; all that was needed was to key the coder section to show the final result. He crouched, peered in the side of the unit. There, to the left was the tiny bank of contacts which would open or close to indicate the score in a nine-digit profile. There were nine rows of nine contacts, squeezed into an area of one half-inch square. It was going to be a ticklish operation . . .

Mart straightened a hair-pin, reached in, delicately touched the row of minute relays; the top row of contacts snapped closed, and a red light went on at the side of the machine. Mart tossed the wire aside, and quickly referred to his record, still in focus on Miss Frinkles' desk-top viewer, then tickled tumblers to show his five letter, four digit personal identity code. Then he pressed a cancel key, to blank the desk-screen, and dropped the cover back in place on the Profiler. He was sitting in a low chair, leafing through a late issue of *Popular Statistics* when Miss Frinkles returned.

"It seems a maintenance man ran berserk down on Nine Level," she said breathlessly. "He killed three people, then set fire to—"

"Well, I must be running along" Mart said, rising. "A very nice little machine you have there. Tell me, are there any manual controls?"

"Oh, yes, didn't you notice them? Each test result must be validated by me before it's released to the Master Files. Suppose someone cheated, or finished late; it wouldn't do to let a disqualified score past."

"Oh, no indeed. And to transfer the data to the Master File, you just push this?" Mart said, leaning across and depressing the key he had seen Miss Frinkles use earlier. There was a sharp buzz from the Profiler. The red light went out.

"Oh, you mustn't—" Miss Frinkles exclaimed. "Not that it would matter in this case, of course," she added apologetically, but—"

THE door opened and the redhead stepped into the room. "Oh," she said, looking at Mart. "There you are. I looked for you in the Testing room—"

Miss Frinkles looked up with a surprised expression. "But I was under the impression—" She smiled. "Oh, Mr. Maldon, you *are* a tease! You'd already com-

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pleted your testing, and you let me think you came in late . . .!"

Mart smiled modestly.

"Oh, Barbara, we must look at his score. He has a fantastic academic record . . ." She looked at the screen. "I don't remember cancelling . . . She dialled again. ". . . at least ten Specialized degrees, and *magna cum laude* in every one . . ."

The screen glowed. Miss Frinkles adjusted a knob, scanned past the first frame to a second. She stared.

"Mr. Maldon! I knew you'd do well, but a *perfect* score!"

The hall door banged wide. "Miss Frinkles—" a tall man stared at Mart, looked him up and down. He backed a step. "Who're you? Where did you get that suit—"

"MISTER Cludd!" Miss Frinkles said in an icy tone. "Kindly refrain from bursting into my office unannounced—and kindly show a trifle more civility to my guest, who happens to be a very remarkable young man who has just completed one of the finest test profiles it has been my pleasure to see during my service with Placement!"

"Eh? Are you sure? I mean—that suit . . . and the shoes . . ."

"I like a conservative outfit," Mart said desperately.

"You mean he's been here all morning . . .?" Mr. Cludd looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"Of course!"

"He was in my exam group, Mr. Cludd," the red-haired girl put in. "I'll vouch for that. Why?"

"Well . . . it just happens the maniac they're looking for is dressed in a similar suit, and . . . well, I guess I lost my head. I was just coming in to tell you he'd been seen on this floor. He made a getaway through a service entrance leading to the helipad on the roof, and . . ." he ran down.

"Thank you, Mr. Cludd," Miss Frinkles said icily. Cludd mumbled and withdrew. Miss Frinkles turned to Mart.

"I'm so thrilled, Mr. Maldon . . ."

"Golly, yes," Barbara said.

"It isn't every day I have the opportunity to Place an applicant of your qualifications. Naturally, you'll have the widest possible choice. I'll give you the current prospectus, and next week—"

"Couldn't you Place me right now, Miss Frinkles?"

"You mean—today?"

"Immediately." Mart looked at the red-head. "I like it here. What openings have you got in your department?"

Miss Frinkles gasped, flushed, smiled, then turned and played with the buttons on her console, watching the small screen. "Wonderful," she breathed. "The

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opening is still unfilled. I was afraid one of the other units might have filled it in the past hour." She poked at more keys. A white card in a narrow platinum holder with a jewelled alligator clip popped from a slot. She rose and handed it to Mart reverently.

"Your new I. D. sir. And I know you're going to make a wonderful chief!"

14

MART sat behind the three-yard-long desk of polished rosewood, surveying the tennis-court-sized expanse of ankle-deep carpet which stretched across to a wide door of deep-polished mahogany, then swivelled to gaze out through wide windows of insulated, polarized, tinted glass at the towers of Granyauck, looming up in a deep blue sky. He turned back, opened the silver box that rested between a jade pen-holder and an ebony paper-weight on the otherwise unadorned desk, lifted out a Chanel dope-stick, sniffed it appreciatively. He adjusted his feet comfortably on the desk top, pressed a tiny silver button set in the arm of the chair. A moment later the door opened with the faintest of sounds.

"Barbara—" Mart began.

"There you are," a deep voice said.

Mart's feet came off the desk with a crash. The large man approaching him across the rug had a familiar look about him . . .

"That was a dirty trick, locking me in the shower. We hadn't figured on that one. Slowed us up something awful." He swung a chair around and sat down.

"But," Mart said. "But . . . but . . ."

"Three days, nine hours and fourteen minutes," the newcomer said, eyeing a finger watch. "I must say you made the most of it. Never figured on you bollixing the examination records, too; most of 'em stop with the faked Academic Record, and figure to take their chances on the exam."

"Most of 'em?" Mart repeated weakly.

"Sure. You didn't think you were the only one selected to go before the Special Placement Board, did you?"

"Selected? Special . . ." Mart's voice trailed off.

"Well, surely you're beginning to understand now, Maldon," the man from whom Mart had stolen the suit said. "We picked you as a potential Top Executive over three years ago. We've followed your record closely ever since. You were on every one of the Board Members' nomination lists —"

"But—but I was quota'd out —"

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"Oh, we could have let you graduate, go through testing, pick up a green tag and a spot on a promotion list, plug away for twenty years, make Exec rank—but we can't waste the time. We need talent, Mart. And we need it now!"

Mart took a deep breath and slammed the desk. "Why in the name of ten thousand devils didn't you just TELL me!"

The visitor shook his head. "Nope; we need good men, Mart—need 'em bad. We need to find the superior individuals; we can't afford to waste time bolstering up the folklore that the will of the people constitutes wisdom. This is a city of a hundred million people—and it's growing at a rate that will double that in a decade. We have problems, Mart. Vast, urgent problems. We need men that can solve 'em. We can test you in academic knowledge, cook up psychological profiles—but we have to KNOW. We have to find out how you react in a real-life situation; what you do to help yourself when you're dumped on the walkaway, broke and hopeless. If you go in and have your brain burned, scratch one. If you meekly register to wait out a Class Two test opening—well, good luck to you. If you walk in and take what you want . . ." he looked around the office . . . then welcome to the Club."

THE END

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A mind-picker, an interstellar policeman, a galactic geographic genius—and a man with a metal heart. They are . . .

The Furies

By ROGER ZELAZNY

AS an afterthought, Nature sometimes tosses a bone to those it maims and casts aside. Often, it is in the form of a skill, usually useless, or the curse of intelligence.

When Sandor Sandor was four years old he could name all the one hundred forty-nine inhabited worlds in the galaxy. When he was five he could name the principal land masses of each planet and chalk them in, roughly, on blank globes. By the time he was seven years old he knew all the provinces, states, countries and major cities of all the main land masses on all one hundred forty-nine inhabited worlds in the galaxy. He read Landography, History, Landology and popular travel guides during most of his waking time; and he studied maps and travel tapes. There was a camera behind his eyes, or so it seemed, because by the time he was ten years old there was no city in the galaxy that anyone could name about which Sandor Sandor did not know *something*.

And he continued.

Places fascinated him. He built a library of street guides, road maps. He studied architectural styles and principal industries, and racial types, native life forms, local flora, landmarks, hotels, restaurants, airports and seaports and spaceports, styles of clothing and personal ornamentation, climatic conditions, local arts and crafts, dietary habits, sports, religions, social institutions, customs.

When he took his doctorate in Landography at the age of fourteen, his oral examinations were conducted via closed circuit television. This is because he was afraid to leave his home—having done so only three times before in his life and having met with fresh trauma on each occasion. And *this* is because on all one hundred forty-nine inhabited worlds in the galaxy there was no

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remedy for a certain degenerative muscular disease. This disease made it impossible for Sandor to manipulate even the finest prosthetic devices for more than a few minutes without suffering fatigue and great pain; and to go outside he required three such devices—two legs and a right arm—to substitute for those which he had missed out on receiving somewhere along the line before birth.

Rather than suffer this pain, or the pain of meeting persons other than his Aunt Faye or his nurse, Miss Barbara, he took his oral examinations via closed circuit television.

The University of Brill, Dombeck, was located on the other side of that small planet from Sandor's home, else the professors would have come to see *him*, because they respected him considerably. His 855-page dissertation, "Some Notes Toward a Gravitational Matrix Theory Governing the Formation of Similar Land Masses on Dissimilar Planetary Bodies," had drawn attention from Interstel University on Earth itself. Sandor Sandor, of course, would never see the Earth. His muscles could only sustain the gravitation of smaller planets, such as Dombeck.

And it happened that the Interstel Government, which monitors everything, had listened in on Sandor's oral examinations and his defense of his dissertation.

Associate Professor Baines was one of Sandor's very few friends. They had even met several times in person, in Sandor's library, because Baines often said he'd wanted to borrow certain books and then came and spent the afternoon. When the examinations were concluded, Associate Professor Baines stayed on the circuit for several minutes, talking with Sandor. It was during this time that Baines made casual reference to an almost useless (academically, that is) talent of Sandor's.

At the mention of it, the government man's ears had pricked forward (he was a Rigellian). He was anxious for a promotion and he recalled an obscure memo . . .

Associate Professor Baines had mentioned the fact that Sandor Sandor had once studied a series of 30 random photos from all over the civilized galaxy, and that the significant data from these same photos had also been fed into the Department's L-L computer. Sandor had named the correct planet in each case, the land mass in 29, the county or territory in 26, and he had correctly set the location itself within 50 square miles in 23 instances. The L-L comp had named the correct planet for 27.

It was not a labor of love for the computer.

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So it became apparent that Sandor Sandor knew just about every damn street in the galaxy.

Ten years later he knew them all.

But three years later the Rigellian quit his job, disgusted, and went to work in private industry, where the pay was better and promotions more frequent. *His* memo, and the tape, had been filed, however . . .

BENEDICK Benedict was born and grew up on the watery world of Kjum, and his was an infallible power for making enemies of everyone he met.

The reason why is that while some men's highest pleasure is drink, and others are given to gluttony, and still others are slothful, or lechery is their chief delight, or *Phrinn*-doing, Benedick's was gossip—he was a loudmouth.

Gossip was his meat and his drink, his sex and his religion. Shaking hands with him was a mistake, often a catastrophic one. For, as he clung to your hand, pumping it and smiling, his eyes would suddenly grow moist and the tears would dribble down his fat cheeks.

He wasn't sad when this happened. Far from it. It was a somatic conversion from his paranorm reaction.

He was seeing your past life.

He was selective, too; he only saw what he looked for. And he looked for scandal and hate, and what is often worse, love; he looked for lawbreaking and unrest, for memories of discomfort, pain, futility, weakness. He saw everything a man wanted to forget, and he talked about it.

If you are lucky he won't tell you of your own. If you have ever met someone else whom he has also met in this manner, and if this fact shows, he will begin talking of *that* person. He will tell you of that man's or woman's life, because he appreciates this form of social reaction even more than your outrage at yourself. And his eyes and voice and hand will hold you, like the clutch of the Ancient Mariner, in a sort of half dream-state; and you will hear him out and you will be shocked beneath your paralysis.

Then he will go away and tell others about you.

Such a man was Benedick Benedict. He was probably unaware how much he was hated, because this reaction never came until later, after he had said "Good day," departed, and been gone for several hours. He left his hearers with a just-raped feeling—and later fear, shame, or disgust forced them to suppress the occurrence and to try to forget him. Or else they hated him quietly, because he was dangerous. That is to say, he had powerful friends.

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He was an extremely social animal; he loved attention, he wanted to be admired, he craved audiences.

He could always find an audience too, somewhere. He knew so many secrets that he was tolerated in important places in return for the hearing. And he was wealthy too, but more of that in a moment.

As time went on, it became harder and harder for him to meet new people. His reputation spread in geometric proportion to his talking, and even those who would hear him preferred to sit on the far side of the room, drink enough alcohol to partly deaden memories of themselves, and to be seated near a door.

The reason for his wealth is because his power extended to inanimate objects as well. Minerals were rare on Kjum, the watery world. If anyone brought him a sample he could hold it and weep and tell them where to dig to hit the main lode.

From one fish caught in the vast seas of Kjum, he could chart the course of a school of fish.

Weeping, he could touch a native rad-pearl necklace and divine the location of the native's rad-pearl bed.

Local insurance associations and loan companies kept Benedict Files—the pen a man had used to sign his contract, his snubbed-out cigarette butt, a plastex hanky with which he had mopped his brow, an object left in security, the remains of a biopsy or blood test—so that Benedick could use his power against those who renege on these companies and flee, on those who break their laws.

He did not revel in his power either. He simply enjoyed it. For he was one of the nineteen known paranorms in the one hundred forty-nine inhabited worlds in the galaxy, and he knew no other way.

Also, he occasionally assisted civil authorities, if he thought their cause a just one. If he did not, he suddenly lost his power until the need for it vanished. This didn't happen too often though, for an humanitarian was Benedick Benedict, and well-paid, because he was laboratory-tested and clinically-proven. He could psychometrize. He could pick up thought-patterns originating outside his own skull . . .

LYNX Links looked like a beachball with a beard, a fat patriarch with an eyepatch, a man who loved good food and drink, simple clothing, and the company of simple people; he was a man who smiled often and whose voice was soft and melodic.

In his earlier years he had chalked up the most impressive kill-record of any agent ever employed by Interstel Central In-

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telligence. Forty-eight men and seventeen malicious alien life-forms had the Lynx dispatched during his fifty-year tenure as a field agent. He was one of the three men in the galaxy to have lived through half a century's employment with ICI. He lived comfortably on his government pension despite three wives and a horde of grandchildren; he was recalled occasionally as a consultant; and he did some part-time missionary work on the side. He believed that all life was one and that all men were brothers, and that love rather than hate or fear should rule the affairs of men. He had even killed with love, he often remarked at Tranquility Session, respecting and revering the person and the spirit of the man who had been marked for death.

This is the story of how he came to be summoned back from Hosanna, the World of the Great and Glorious Flame of the Divine Life, and was joined with Sandor Sandor and Benedick Benedict in the hunt for Victor Corgo, the man without a heart.

* * *

Victor Corgo was Captain of the *Wallaby*. Victor Corgo was Head Astrogator, First Mate, and Chief Engineer of the *Wallaby*. Victor Corgo *was* the *Wallaby*.

One time the *Wallaby* was a proud Guardship, an ebony toadstool studded with the jewel-like warts of fast-phrase projectors. One time the *Wallaby* skipped proud about the frontier worlds of Interstel, meting out the unique justice of the Uniform Galactic Code—in those places where there was no other law. One time the proud *Wallaby*, under the command of Captain Victor Corgo of the Guard, had ranged deep space and become a legend under legendary skies.

A terror to brigands and ugly aliens, a threat to Code-breakers, and a thorn in the sides of evil-doers everywhere, Corgo and his shimmering fungus (which could burn an entire continent under water-level within a single day) were the pride of the Guard, the best of the best, the cream that had been skimmed from all the rest.

Unfortunately, Corgo sold out.

He became a heel.

. . . A traitor.

A hero gone bad . . .

After forty-five years with the Guard, his pension but half a decade away, he lost his entire crew in an ill-timed raid upon a pirate stronghold on the planet Kilsh, which might have become the hundred-fiftieth inhabited world of Interstel.

Crawling, barely alive, he had made his way half across the great snowfield of Brild, on the main land mass of Kilsh. At the fortuitous moment, Death mak-

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ing its traditional noises of approach, he was snatched from out its traffic lane, so to speak, by the Drillen, a nomadic tribe of ugly and intelligent quadrapeds, who took him to their camp and healed his wounds, fed him, and gave him warmth. Later, with the cooperation of the Drillen, he recovered the *Wallaby* and all its arms and armaments, from where it had burnt its way to a hundred feet beneath the ice.

Crewless, he trained the Drillen.

With the Drillen and the *Wallaby* he attacked the pirates.

He won.

But he did not stop with that.

No.

When he learned that the Drillen had been marked for death under the Uniform Code he sold out his own species. The Drillen had refused relocation to a decent Reservation World. They had elected to continue occupancy of what was to become the hundred-fiftieth inhabited world in the galaxy (that is to say, in Interstel).

Therefore, the destruct-order had been given.

Captain Corgo protested, was declared out of order.

Captain Corgo threatened, was threatened in return.

Captain Corgo fought, was beaten, died, was resurrected, escaped restraint, became an outlaw.

He took the *Wallaby* with him. The *Happy Wallaby*, it had been called in the proud days. Now, it was just the *Wallaby*.

As the tractor beams had seized it, as the vibrations penetrated its ebony hull and tore at his flesh, Corgo had called his six Drillen to him, stroked the fur of Mala, his favorite, opened his mouth to speak, and died just as the words and the tears began.

"I am sorry . . ." he had said.

They gave him a new heart, though. His old one had fibrillated itself to pieces and could not be repaired. They put the old one in a jar and gave him a shiny, antiseptic egg of throbbing metal, which expanded and contracted at varying intervals, dependent upon what the seed-sized computers they had planted within him told of his breathing and his blood sugar and the output of his various glands. The seeds and the egg contained his life.

When they were assured that this was true and that it would continue, they advised him of the proceedings of courts martial.

He did not wait, however, for due process. Breaking his parole as an officer, he escaped the Guard Post, taking with him Mala, the only remaining Drillen in the galaxy. Her five fellows had not survived scientific inquiry as to the nature of their internal structures. The rest of

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the race, of course, had refused relocation.

Then did the man without a heart make war upon mankind.

RAPING a planet involves considerable expense. Enormous blasters and slicers and sluicers and refiners are required to reduce a world back almost to a state of primal chaos, and then to extract from it its essential (*i.e.*, commercially viable) ingredients. The history books may tell you of strip-mining on the mother planet, back in ancient times. Well, the crude processes employed then were similar in emphasis and result, but the operations were considerably smaller in scale.

Visualize a hundred miles of Grand Canyon appearing overnight; visualize the reversal of thousands of Landological millenia in the twinkling of an eye; consider all the Ice Ages of the Earth, and compress them into a single season. This will give you a rough idea as to time and effect.

Now picture the imported labor—the men who drill and blast and slice and sluice for the great mining combines: Not uneducated, these men; willing to take a big risk, certainly though, these men—maybe only for one year, because of the high pay; or maybe they're careerists, because of the high pay—these men, who hit three worlds in a year's time, who descend upon these worlds in ships full of city, in space-trailer mining camps, out of the sky; coming, these men, from all over the inhabited galaxy, bringing with them the power of the tool and the opposed thumb, bearing upon their brows the mark of the Solar Phoenix and in their eyes the cold of the spaces they have crossed over, they know what to do to make the domes of atoms rise before them and to call down the tornado-probosci of suck-vortices from the freighters on the other side of the sky; and they do it thoroughly and efficiently, and not without style, tradition, folksongs, and laughter—for they are the sweat-crews, working against time (which is money), to gain tonnage (which is money), and to beat their competitors to market (which is important, inasmuch as one worldsworth influences future sales for many months), these men, who bear in one hand the flame and in the other the whirlwind, who come down with their families and all their possessions, erect temporary metropoli, work their magic act, and go—after the vanishing trick has been completed.

Now that you've an idea as to what happens and who is present at the scene, here's the rub:

Raping a planet involves considerable expense.

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The profits are more than commensurate, do not misunderstand. It is just that they could be even greater . . .

How?

Well— For one thing, the heavy machinery involved is quite replaceable, in the main. That is, the machinery which is housed within the migrant metropoli.

Moving it is expensive. Not moving it isn't. For it is actually cheaper, in terms of material and labor, to manufacture new units than it is to fast-phase the old ones more than an average of 2.6 times.

Mining combines do not produce them (and wouldn't really want to); the mining manufacturing combines like to make new units as much as the mining combines like to lose old ones.

And of course it is rented machinery, or machinery on which payments are still being made, to the financing associations, because carrying payments makes it easier to face down the Interstel Revenue Service every fiscal year.

Abandoning the units would be criminal, violating either the lessor-lessee agreement or the Interstel Commercial Code.

But accidents do happen . . .

Often, too frequently to make for comfortable statistics . . .

Way out there on the raw frontier.

Then do the big insurance associations investigate, and they finally sigh and reimburse the lien-holders.

. . . And the freighters make it to market ahead of schedule, because there is less to dismantle and march-order and ship.

Time is saved, commitments are met in advance, a better price is generally obtained, and a headstart on the next worldsworth is supplied in this manner.

All of which is nice.

Except for the insurance associations.

But what can happen to a transitory New York full of heavy equipment?

Well, some call it sabotage.

. . . Some call it mass-murder.

. . . Unsanctioned war.

. . . Corgo's lightning.

But it is written that it is better to burn one city than to curse the darkness.

Corgo did not curse the darkness.

. . . Many times.

THE day they came together on Dombeck, Benedick held forth his hand, smiled, said: "Mister Sandor . . ."

As his hand was shaken, his smile reversed itself. Then it went away from his face. He was shaking an artificial hand.

Sandor nodded, dropped his eyes.

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Benedick turned to the big man with the eyepatch.

". . . And you are the Lynx?"

"That is correct, my brother. You must excuse me if I do not shake hands. It is against my religion. I believe that life does not require reassurance as to its oneness."

"Of course," said Benedick. "I once knew a man from Dombeck. He was a *gnil* smuggler, named Worten Wortan—"

"He is gone to join the Great Flame," said the Lynx. "That is to say, he is dead now. ICI apprehended him two years ago. He passed to Flame while attempting to escape restraint."

"Really?" said Benedick. "He was at one time a *gnil* addict himself—"

"I know. I read his file in connection with another case."

"Dombeck is full of *gnil* smugglers"—Sandor.

"Oh. Well, then let us talk of this man Corgo."

"Yes"—the Lynx.

"Yes"—Sandor.

"The ICI man told me that many insurance associations have lodged protests with their Interstel representatives."

"That is true"—Lynx.

"Yes"—Sandor, biting his lip. "Do you gentlemen mind if I remove my legs?"

"Not at all"—the Lynx. "We are co-workers, and informality should govern our gatherings."

"Please do," said Benedick.

Sandor leaned forward in his chair and pressed the coupling controls. There followed two thumps from beneath his desk. He leaned back then and surveyed his shelves of globes.

"Do they cause you pain?" asked Benedick.

"Yes"—Sandor.

"Were you in an accident?"

"Birth"—Sandor.

The Lynx raised a decanter of brownish liquid to the light. He stared through it.

"It is a local brandy"—Sandor. "Quite good. Somewhat like the *xmili* of Bandla, only non-addictive. Have some."

The Lynx did, keeping it in front of him all that evening.

"Corgo is a destroyer of property," said Benedick.

Sandor nodded.

". . . And a defrauder of insurance associations, a defacer of planetary bodies, a deserter from the Guard—"

"A murderer"—Sandor.

". . . And a zoophilist," finished Benedick.

"Aye"—the Lynx, smacking his lips.

"So great an offender against public tranquility is he that he must be found."

". . . And passed back through the Flame for purification and rebirth."

"Yes, we must locate him and kill him," said Benedick.

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"The two pieces of equipment . . . Are they present?"—the Lynx.

"Yes, the phase-wave is in the next room."

". . . And?" asked Benedick.

"The other item is in the bottom drawer of this desk, right side."

"Then why do we not begin now?"

"Yes. Why not now?"—the Lynx.

"Very well"—Sandor. "One of you will have to open the drawer, though. It is in the brown-glass jar, to the back."

"I'll get it," said Benedick.

A GREAT sob escaped him after a time, as he sat there with rows of worlds at his back, tears on his cheeks, and Corgo's heart clutched in his hands.

"It is cold and dim . . ."

"Where?"—the Lynx.

"It is a small place. A room? Cabin? Instrument panels . . . A humming sound . . . Cold, and crazy angles everywhere . . . Vibration . . . Hurt!"

"What is he doing?"—Sandor.

". . . Sitting, half-lying—a couch, webbed, about him. Furry one at his side, sleeping. Twisted — angles — everything — wrong. Hurt!"

"The *Wallaby*, in transit"—Lynx.

"Where is he going?"—Sandor.

"HURT!" shouted Benedick.

Sandor dropped the heart into his lap.

He began to shiver. He wiped at his eyes with the backs of his hands.

"I have a headache," he announced.

"Have a drink"—Lynx.

He gulped one, sipped the second.

"Where was I?"

The Lynx raised his shoulders and let them fall.

"The *Wallaby* was fast-phasing somewhere, and Corgo was in phase-sleep. It is a disturbing sensation to fast-phase while fully conscious. Distance and duration grow distorted. You found him at a bad time—while under sedation and subject to continuum-impact. Perhaps tomorrow will be better . . ."

"I hope so."

"Yes, tomorrow"—Sandor.

"Tomorrow . . . Yes.

"There *was* one other thing," he added, "a thing in his mind . . . There was a sun where there was no sun before."

"A burn-job?"—Lynx.

"Yes."

"A memory?"—Sandor.

"No. He is on his way to do it."

The Lynx stood.

"I will phase-wave ICI and advise them. They can check which worlds are presently being mined. Have you any ideas how soon?"

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"No," I can not tell that.

"What did the globe look like? What continental configurations?"—Sandor.

"None. The thought was not that specific. His mind was drifting—mainly filled with hate."

"I'll call in now—and we'll try again . . .?"

"Tomorrow. I'm tired now."

"Go to bed then. Rest."

"Yes, I can do that . . ."

"Good night, Mister Benedict."

"Good night . . ."

"Sleep in the heart of the Great Flame."

"I hope not . . ."

MALA whimpered and moved nearer her Corgo, for she was dreaming an evil dream: They were back on the great snowfield of Brild, and she was trying to help him—to walk, to move forward. He kept slipping though, and lying there longer each time, and rising more slowly each time and moving ahead at an even slower pace, each time. He tried to kindle a fire, but the snow-devils spun and toppled like icicles falling from the seven moons, and the dancing green flames died as soon as they were born from between his hands.

Finally, on the top of a mountain of ice she saw them.

There were three . . .

They were clothed from head to toe in flame; their burning heads turned and turned and turned; and then one bent and sniffed at the ground, rose, and indicated their direction. Then they were racing down the hillside, trailing flames, melting a pathway as they came, springing over drifts and ridges of ice, their arms extended before them.

Silent they came, pausing only as the one sniffed the air, the ground . . .

She could hear their breathing now, feel their heat . . .

In a matter of moments they would arrive . . .

Mala whimpered and moved nearer her Corgo.

* * *

For three days Benedick tried, clutching Corgo's heart like a Gipsy's crystal, watering it with his tears, squeezing it almost to life again. His head ached for hours after, each time that he met the continuum-impact. He wept long, moist tears for hours beyond contact, which was unusual. He had always withdrawn from immediate pain before; remembered distress was his forte, and a different matter altogether.

He hurt each time that he touched Corgo and his mind was sucked down through that subway in the sky; and he touched Corgo eleven times during those three days, and then his power went away, really.

Seated, like a lump of dark

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metal on the hull of the *Wallaby*, he stared across six hundred miles at the blazing hearth which he had stoked to steel-tempering heights; and he *felt* like a piece of metal, resting there upon an anvil, waiting for the hammer to fall again, as it always did, waiting for it to strike him again and again, and to beat him to a new toughness, to smash away more and more of that within him which was base, of that which knew pity, remorse, and guilt, again and again and again, and to leave only that hard, hard form of hate, like an iron boot, which lived at the core of the lump, himself, and required constant hammering and heat.

Sweating as he watched, smiling, Corgo took pictures.

When one of the nineteen known paranorms in the one hundred forty-nine inhabited worlds in the galaxy suddenly loses his powers, and loses them at a crucial moment, it is like unto the old tales wherein a Princess is stricken one day with an unknown malady and the King, her father, summons all his wise men and calls for the best physicians in the realm.

Big Daddy ICI (*Rex ex machina*-like) did, in similar manner, summon wise men and counsellors from various Thinkomats and think-repairshops about the galaxy, including Interstel University, on Earth itself. But alas! while all had a diagnosis, none had on hand any suggestions which were immediately acceptable to all parties concerned:

"A drug-induced counter-trauma should work best."

"Bombard his thalamus with Beta particles."

"Hypno-regression to the womb, and restoration at a pre-traumatic point in his life."

"More continuum-impact."

"Six weeks on a pleasure satellite, and two aspirins every four hours."

"There is an old operation called a lobotomy . . ."

"Lots of liquids and green leafy vegetables."

"Hire another paranorm."

For one reason or another, the principal balked at all of these courses of action, and the final one was impossible at the moment. In the end, the matter was settled neatly by Sandor's nurse Miss Barbara, who happened onto the veranda one afternoon as Benedick sat there fanning himself and drinking *xmili*.

"Why Mister Benedict!" she announced, plopping her matronly self into the chair opposite him and spiking her *redlonade* with three fingers of *xmili*. "Fancy meeting you out here! I thought you were in the library with the boys, working on that top secret hush-hush critical

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project called Wallaby Stew, or something."

"As you can see, I am not," he said, staring at his knees.

"Well, it's nice just to pass the time of day sometimes, too. To sit. To relax. To rest from the hunting of Victor Corgo . . ."

"Please, you're not supposed to know about the project. It's top secret and critical—"

"And hush-hush too, I know. Dear Sandor talks in his sleep every night—so much. You see, I tuck him in each evening and sit there until he drifts away to dreamland, poor child."

"Mm, yes. Please don't talk about the project, though."

"Why? Isn't it going well?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because of *me*, if you must know! I've got a block of some kind. The power doesn't come when I call it."

"Oh, how distressing! You mean you can't peep into other persons' minds any more?"

"Exactly."

"Dear me. Well, let's talk about something else then. Did I ever tell you about the days when I was the highest-paid courtesan on Sordido V?"

Benedick's head turned slowly in her direction.

"Nooo . . ." he said. "You mean *the* Sordido?"

"Oh yes. Bright Bad Barby, the Bouncing Baby, they used to call me. They still sing ballads, you know."

"Yes, I've heard them. Many verses . . ."

"Have another drink. I once had a coin struck in my image, you know. It's a collectors' item now, of course. Full-length pose, flesh-colored. Here, I wear it on this chain around my neck.—Lean closer, it's a short chain."

"Very—interesting. Uh, how did all this come about?"

"Well—it all began with old Pruria Van Teste, the banker, of the export-import Testes. You see, he had this thing going for synthofemmes for a long while, but when he started getting up there in years he felt there was something he'd been missing. So, one fine day, he sent me ten dozen Hravian orchids and a diamond garter, along with an invitation to have dinner with him . . ."

"You accepted, of course?"

"Naturally not. Not the first time, anyway. I could see that he was pretty damn eager."

"Well, what happened?"

"Wait till I fix another *redlonade*."

LATER that afternoon, the Lynx wandered out onto the veranda during the course of his meditations. He saw there Miss Barbara, with Benedick seated beside her, weeping.

"What troubles thy tranquility, my brother?" he inquired.

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"Nothing! Nothing at all! It is wonderful and beautiful, everything! My power has come back —I can feel it!" He wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

"Bless thee, little lady!" said the Lynx, seizing Miss Barbara's hand. "Thy simple counsels have done more to heal my brother than have all these highly-paid medical practitioners brought here at great expense. Virtue lies in thy homely words, and thou art most beloved of the Flame."

"Thank you, I'm sure."

"Come brother, let us away to our task again!"

"Yes, let us!—Oh thank you, Bright Barby!"

"Don't mention it."

Benedick's eyes clouded immediately, as he took the tattered blood-pump into his hands. He leaned back, stroking it, and moist spots formed on either side of his nose, grew like well-fed amoebae, underwent mitosis, and dashed off to explore in the vicinity of his shelf-like upper lip.

He sighed once, deeply.

"Yes, I am there."

He blinked, licked his lips.

". . . It is night. Late. It is a primitive dwelling. Mud-like stucco, bits of straw in it . . . All lights out, but for the one from the machine, and its spillage—"

"Machine?"—Lynx.

"What machine?"—Sandor.

". . . Projector. Pictures on wall . . . World — big, filling whole picture-field—patches of fire on the world, up near the top. Three places—"

"Bhave VII!"—Lynx. "Six days ago!"

"Shoreline to the right goes like this. . . And to the left, like this. . . "

His right index finger traced patterns in the air.

"Bhave VII"—Sandor.

"Happy and not happy at the same time—hard to separate the two. Guilt, though, is there—but pleasure with it. Revenge . . . Hate people, humans . . . We adjust the projector now, stop it at a flareup. — Bright! How good!—Oh good! That will teach them!—Teach them to grab away what belongs to others . . . To murder a race!—The generator is humming. It is ancient, and it smells bad . . . The dog is lying on our foot. The foot is asleep, but we do not want to disturb the dog, for it is Mala's favorite thing—her only toy, companion, living doll, four-footed . . . She is scratching behind its ear with her forelimb, and it loves her. Light leaks down upon them . . . Clear they are. The breeze is warm, very, which is why we are unshirted. It stirs the tasseled hanging . . . No force-field or windowpane . . . Insects buzz by the projector—pterodactyl silhouettes on the burning world—"

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"What kind of insects?"—Lynx.

"Can you see what is beyond the window?"—Sandor.

". . . Outside are trees—short ones—just outlines, squat. Can't tell where trunks begin. . . Foliage too thick, too close. Too dark out.—Off in the distance a tiny moon . . . Something like *this* on a hill . . ." His hands shaped a turnip impaled on an obelisk. "Not sure how far off, how large, what color, or what made of . . ."

"Is the name of the place in Corgo's mind?"—Lynx.

"If I could touch him, with my hand, I would know it, know everything. Only receive impressions *this* way, though—surface thoughts. He is not thinking of where he is now . . . The dog rolls onto its back and off of our foot—at last! She scratches its tummy, my love dark . . .It kicks with its hind leg as if scratching after a flea—wags its tail. Dilk is puppy's name. She gave it that name, loves it. . . It is like one of hers. Which was murdered. Hate people—humans. *She* is people. Better than . . . Doesn't butcher that which breathes for selfish gain, for Interstel. Better than people, my pony-friends, better . . . An insect lights on Dilk's nose. She brushes it away. Segmented, two sets of wings, about five millimeters in length, pink globe on front end, bulbous, and buzzes as it goes, the insect—you asked . . ."

"How many entrances are there to the place?"—Lynx.

"Two. One doorway at each end of the hut."

"How many windows?"

"Two. On opposing walls—the ones without doors. I can't see anything through the other window—too dark on that side."

"Anything else?"

"On the wall a sword—long hilt, very long, two-handed—even longer maybe—three? four?—short blades, though, two of them—hilt is in the middle—and each blade is straight, double-edged, forearm-length . . . Beside it, a mask of—flowers? Too dark to tell. The blades shine, the mask is dull. Looks like flowers, though. Many little ones . . . Four sides to the mask, shaped like a kite, big end down. Can't make out features. It projects fairly far out from the wall, though. Mala is restless. Probably doesn't like the pictures—or maybe doesn't see them and is bored. Her eyes are different. She nuzzles our shoulder now. We pour her a drink in her bowl. Take another one ourself. She doesn't drink hers. We stare at her. She drops her head and drinks.—Dirt floor under our sandals, hard-packed. Many tiny white—pebbles?—in it, powdery-like. The table is wood, natural

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. . . The generator sputters. The picture fades, comes back. We rub our chin. Need a shave . . . The hell with it! We're not standing any inspections! Drink—one, two—all gone! Another!"

SANDOR had threaded a tape into his viewer, and he was spinning it and stopping it, spinning it and stopping it. He checked his worlds chronometer.

"Outside," he asked, "does the moon seem to be moving up, or down, or across the sky?"

"Across."

"Right to left, or left to right?"

"Right to left. It seems about a quarter past zenith."

"Any coloration to it?"

"Orange, with three black lines. One starts at about eleven o'clock, crosses a quarter of its surface, drops straight down, cuts back at seven. The other starts at two, drops to six. They don't meet. The third is a small upside-down letter 'c'—lower right quarter . . . Not big, the moon, but clear, very. No clouds."

"Any constellations you can make out?"—Lynx.

". . . Head isn't turned that way now, wasn't turned toward the window long enough. Now there is a noise, far off . . . A high-pitched chattering, almost metallic. Animal. He pictures a six-legged tree creature, half the size of a man, reddish-brown hair, sparse . . . It can go on two, four, or six legs on the ground. Doesn't go down on the ground much, though. Nests high. An egg-layer. Many teeth. Eats flesh. Small eyes, and black—two. Great nose-holes. Pesty, but not dangerous to men—easily frightened."

"He is on Disten, the fifth world of Blake's System," said Sandor. "Night-side means he is on the continent Diden-lan. The moon Babry, well past zenith now, means he is to the east. A Mellar-mosque indicates a Mella-Muslim settlement. The blade and the mask seem Hortanian. I am sure they were brought from further inland. The chalky deposits would set him in the vicinity of Landear, which *is* Mella-Muslim. It is on the Dista River, north bank. There is much jungle about. Even those people who wish seclusion seldom go further than eight miles from the center of town—population 153,000—and it is least settled to the northwest, because of the hills, the rocks, and—"

"Fine! That's where he is then!"—Lynx. "Now here is how we'll do it. He has, of course, been sentenced to death. I believe—yes, I know!—there is an ICI Field Office on the second world—whatever its name—of that System."

"Nirer"—Sandor.

"Yes. Hmm, let's see . . . Two agents will be empowered as

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executioners. They will land their ship to the northwest of Landear, enter the city, and find where the man with the strange four-legged pet settled, the one who arrived within the past six days. Then one agent will enter the hut and ascertain whether Corgo is within. He will retreat immediately if Corgo is present, signalling to the other who will be hidden behind those trees or whatever. The second man will then fire a round of fragmentation plaster through the unguarded window. One agent will then position himself at a safe distance beyond the northeast corner of the edifice, so as to cover a door and a window. The other will move to the southwest, to do the same. Each will carry a two-hundred channel laser sub-gun with vibrating head.—Good! I'll phase-wase it to Central now. We've got him!"

He hurried from the room.

Benedick, still holding the thing, his shirt-front soaking, continued:

" 'Fear not, my lady dark. He is but a puppy, and he howls at the moon . . . ' "

IT was 31 hours and 20 minutes later when the Lynx received and decoded the two terse statements:

EXECUTIONERS THE WAY OF ALL FLESH. THE WALLABY HAS JUMPED AGAIN.

He licked his lips. His comrades were waiting for the report, and *they* had succeeded—they had done their part, had performed efficiently and well. It was the Lynx who had missed his kill.

He made the sign of the Flame and entered the library.

Benedick knew—*he* could tell. The little paranorm's hands were on his walking stick, and that was enough—just that.

The Lynx bowed his head.

"We begin again," he told them.

Benedick's powers—if anything, stronger than ever—survived continuum-impact seven more times. Then he described a new world: Big it was, and many-peopled—bright—dazzling, under a blue-white sun; yellow brick everywhere, neo-Denebian architecture, greenglass windows, a purple sea nearby . . .

No trick at all for Sandor:

"Phillip's World," he named it, then told them the city: "Delles."

"This time *we* burn *him*," said the Lynx, and he was gone from the room.

"Christian-Zoroastrians," sighed Benedick, after he had left. "I think this one has a Flame-complex."

Sandor spun the globe with his left hand and watched it turn.

"I'm not preconning," said Benedick, "but I'll give you odds.

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like three to one—on Corgo's escaping again."

"Why?"

"When he abandoned humanity he became something less, and more. He is not ready to die."

"What do you mean?"

"I hold his heart. He gave it up, in all ways. He is invincible now. But he will réclaim it one day. Then he will die."

"How do you know?"

". . . A feeling. There are many types of doctors, among them pathologists. No less than others, they, but masters only of blackness. I *know* people, have known many. I do not pretend to know *all* about them. But weaknesses—yes, those I know."

Sandor turned his globe and did not say anything.

But they *did* burn the *Wallaby*, badly.

He lived, though.

He lived, cursing.

As he lay there in the gutter, the world burning, exploding, falling down around him, he cursed *that* world and every other, and everything in them.

Then there was another burst.

Blackness followed.

THE double-bladed Hortanian sword, spinning in the hands of Corgo, had halved the first ICI executioner as he stood in the doorway. Mala had detected their approach across the breezes, through the open window.

The second had fallen before the fragmentation plaster could be launched. Corgo had a laser sub-gun himself, Guard issue, and he cut the man down, firing through the wall and two trees in the direction Mala indicated.

Then the *Wallaby* left Disten.

But he was troubled. How had they found him so quickly? He had had close brushes with them before—many of them, over the years. But he was cautious, and he could not see where he had failed this time, could not understand how Interstel had located him. Even his last employer did not know his whereabouts.

He shook his head and phased for Phillip's world.

To die is to sleep and not to dream, and Corgo did not want this. He took elaborate pains, inphasing and out-phasing in random directions; he gave Mala a golden collar with a two-way radio in its clasp, wore its mate within his death-ring; he converted much currency, left the *Wallaby* in the care of a reputable smuggler in Unassociated Territory and crossed Phillip's World to Delles-by-the-Sea. He was fond of sailing, and he liked the purple waters of this planet. He rented a large villa near the Delles Dives—slums to the one side, Riviera to the other. This pleased him. He still had dreams; he was not dead yet.

Sleeping, perhaps, he had

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heard a sound. Then he was suddenly seated on the side of his bed, a handful of death in his hand.

"Mala?"

She was gone. The sound he'd heard had been the closing of a door.

He activated the radio.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"I have the feeling we are watched again," she replied, through his ring. ". . . Only a feeling, though."

Her voice was distant, tiny.

"Why did you not tell *me?* Come back—now."

"No. I match the night and can move without sound. I will investigate. There *is* something, if I have fear . . . Arm yourself!"

He did that, and as he moved toward the front of the house they struck. He ran. As he passed through the front door they struck again, and again. There was an inferno at his back, and a steady rain of plaster, metal, wood and glass was falling. Then there was an inferno around him.

They were above him. This time they had been cautioned not to close with him, but to strike from a distance. This time they hovered high in a shielded globe and poured down hot rivers of destruction.

Something struck him in the head and the shoulder. He fell, turning. He was struck in the chest, the stomach. He covered his face and rolled, tried to rise, failed. He was lost in a forest of flames. He got into a crouch, ran, fell again, rose once more, ran, fell again, crawled, fell again.

As he lay there in the gutter, the world burning, exploding, falling down around him, he cursed *that* world and every other, and everyone in them.

Then there was another burst.

Blackness followed.

THEY thought they had succeeded, and their joy was great.

"Nothing," Benedick had said, smiling through his tears.

So that day they celebrated, and the next.

But Corgo's body had not been recovered.

Almost half a block had been hurled down, though, and eleven other residents could not be located either, so it seemed safe to assume that the execution had succeeded. ICI, however, requested that the trio remain together on Dombeck for another ten days, while further investigations were carried out.

Benedick laughed.

"Nothing," he repeated. "Nothing."

But there is a funny thing about a man without a heart: His body does not live by the same rules as those of others: No. The egg in his chest is smarter than a mere heart, and

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it is the center of a wonderful communications system. Dead itself, it is omniscient in terms of that which lives around it; it is not omnipotent, but it has resources which a living heart does not command.

As the burns and lacerations were flashed upon the screen of the body, it sat in instant criticism. It moved itself to an emergency level of function; it became a flag vibrating within a hurricane; the glands responded and poured forth their jucies of power; muscles were activated as if by electricity.

Corgo was only half-aware of the inhuman speed with which he moved through the storm of heat and the hail of building materials. It tore at him, but this pain was cancelled. His massive output jammed non-essential neural input. He made it as far as the street and collapsed in the shelter of the curb.

The egg took stock of the cost of the action, decided the price had been excessively high, and employed immediate measures to insure the investment.

Down, down did it send him. Into the depths of sub-coma. Standard-model humans cannot decide one day that they wish to hibernate, lie down, do it. The physicians can induce *dauerschlaff* with combinations of drugs and elaborate machineries. But Corgo did not need these things. He had a built-in survival kit with a mind of its own; and it decided that he must go deeper than the mere coma-level that a heart would have permitted. So it did the things a heart cannot do, while maintaining its own functions.

It hurled him into the blackness of sleep without dreams, of total unawareness. For only at the border of death itself could his life be retained, be strengthened, grow again. To approach this near the realm of death, its semblance was necessary.

Therefore, Corgo lay dead in the gutter.

PEOPLE, of course, flock to the scene of any disaster.

Those from the Riviera pause to dress in their best catastrophe clothing. Those from the slums do not, because their wardrobes are not as extensive.

One though, was dressed already and was passing nearby. "Zim" was what he was called, for obvious reasons. He had had another name once, but he had all but forgotten it.

He was staggering home from the *zimlak* parlor where he had cashed his Guard pension check for that month-cycle.

There was an explosion, but it was seconds before he realized it. Muttering, he stopped and turned very slowly in the direction of the noise. Then he saw the

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flames. He looked up, saw the hoverglobe. A memory appeared within his mind and he winced and continued to watch.

After a time he saw the man, moving at a fantastic pace across the landscape of Hell. The man fell in the street. There was more burning, and then the globe departed.

The impressions finally registered, and his disaster-reflex made him approach.

Indelible synapses, burnt into his brain long ago, summoned up page after page of The Complete Guard Field Manual of Immediate Medical Actions. He knelt beside the body, red with burn, blood and firelight.

". . . Captain," he said, as he stared into the angular face with the closed dark eyes. "Captain . . ."

He covered his own face with his hands and they came away wet.

"Neighbors. Here. Us. Didn't —know . . ." He listened for a heartbeat, but there was nothing that he could detect. "Fallen . . . On the deck my Captain lies . . . fallen . . . cold . . . dead. Us. Neighbors, even . . ." His sob was a jagged thing, until he was seized with a spell of hiccups. Then he steadied his hands and raised an eyelid.

Corgo's head jerked two inches to his left, away from the brightness of the flames.

The man laughed in relief. "You're alive, Cap! You're still alive!"

The thing that was Corgo did not reply.

Bending, straining, he raised the body.

"'Do not move the victim'—that's what it says in the Manual. But you're coming with me, Cap. I remember now . . . It was after I left. But I remember . . . All. Now I remember, I do . . . Yes. They'll kill you another time —if you do live . . . They will, I know. So I'll have to move the victim. Have to . . . —Wish I wasn't so fogged . . . I'm sorry, Cap. You were always good, to the men, good to me. Ran a tight ship, but you were good . . . Old *Wallaby*, happy . . . Yes. We'll go now, killer. 'Fast as we can. Before the Morbs come.—Yes. I remember . . . you. Good man, Cap. Yes."

So, the *Wallaby* had made its last jump, according to the ICI investigation which followed. But Corgo still dwelled on the dreamless border, and the seeds and the egg held his life.

After the ten days had passed, the Lynx and Benedick still remained with Sandor. Sandor was not anxious for them to go. He had never been employed before; he liked the feeling of having coworkers about, persons who

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shared memories of things done. Benedick was loathe to leave Miss Barbara, one of the few persons he could talk to and have answer him, willingly. The Lynx liked the food and the climate, decided his wives and grandchildren could use a vacation.

So they stayed on.

RETURNING from death is a deadly slow business. Reality does the dance of the veils, and it is a long while before you know what lies beneath them all (if you ever really do).

When Corgo had formed a rough idea, he cried out:

"Mala!"

. . . The darkness.

Then he saw a face out of times gone by.

"Sergeant Emil . . . ?"

"Yes, sir. Right here, Captain."

"Where am I?"

"My hutch, sir. Yours got burnt out."

"How?"

"A hoverglobe did it, with a sear-beam."

"What of my—pet? A Drillen . . ."

"There was only you I found, sir—no one, nothing, else. Uh, it was almost a month-cycle ago that it happened . . ."

Corgo tried to sit up, failed, tried again, half-succeeded. He sat propped on his elbows.

"What's the matter with me?"

"You had some fractures, burns, lacerations, internal injuries—but you're going to be all right, now."

"I wonder how they found me, so fast—again . . . ?"

"I don't know, sir. Would you like to try some broth now?"

"Later."

"It's all warm and ready."

"Okay, Emil. Sure, bring it on."

He lay back and wondered.

There was her voice. He had been dozing all day and he was part of a dream.

"Corgo, are you there? Are you there, Corgo? Are you . . ."

His hand! The ring!

"Yes! Me! Corgo!" He activated it. "Mala! Where are you?"

"In a cave, by the sea. Every day I have called to you. Are you alive, or do you answer me from Elsewhere?"

"I am alive. There is no magic to your collar. How have you kept yourself?"

"I go out at night. Steal food from the large dwellings with the green windows like doors—for Dilk and myself."

"The puppy? Alive, too?"

"Yes. He was penned in the yard on that night . . . Where are you?"

"I do not know, precisely . . . Near where our place was. A few blocks away—I'm with an old friend . . ."

"I must come."

"Wait until dark. I'll get you

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directions. —No. I'll send him after you, my friend . . . Where is your cave?"

"Up the beach, past the red house you said was ugly. There are three rocks, pointed on top. Past them is a narrow path—the water comes up to it, sometimes covers it—and around a corner then, thirty-one of my steps, and the rock hangs overhead, too. It goes far back then, and there is a crack in the wall—small enough to squeeze through, but it widens. We are here."

"My friend will come for you after dark."

"You are hurt?"

"I was. But I am better now. I'll see you later, talk more then."

"Yes—"

IN the days that followed, his strength returned to him. He played chess with Emil and talked with him of their days together in the Guard. He laughed, for the first time in many years, at the tale of the Commander's wig, at the Big Brawl on Sordido III, some thirty-odd years before . . .

Mala kept to herself, and to Dilk. Occasionally, Corgo would feel her eyes upon him. But whenever he turned, she was always looking in another direction. He realized that she had never seen him being friendly with anyone before. She seemed puzzled.

He drank *zimlak* with Emil, they ventured off-key ballads together . . .

Then one day it struck him.

"Emil, what are you using for money these days?"

"Guard pension, Cap."

"Flames! We've been eating you out of business! Food, and the medical supplies and all . . ."

"I had a little put away for foul weather days, Cap."

"Good. But you shouldn't have been using it. There's quite a bit of money zipped up in my boots. —Here. Just a second . . . There! Take these!"

"I can't, Cap . . ."

"The hell, you say! Take them, that's an order!"

"All right, sir. But you don't have to . . ."

"Emil, there is a price on my head—you know?"

"I know."

"A pretty large reward."

"Yes."

"It's yours, by right."

"I couldn't turn you in, sir."

"Nevertheless, the reward is yours. Twice over. I'll send you that amount—a few weeks after I leave here."

"I couldn't take it, sir."

"Nonsense, you will."

"No, sir. I won't."

"What do you mean?"

"I just mean I couldn't take that money."

"Why not? What's wrong with it?"

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"Nothing, exactly . . . I just don't want any of it. I'll take this you gave me for the food and stuff. But no more, that's all."

"Oh . . . All right, Emil. Any way you like it. I wasn't trying to force . . ."

"I know, Cap."

"Another game now? I'll spot you a bishop and three pawns this time."

"Very good, sir."

"We had some good time together, eh?"

"You bet, Cap. Tau Ceti—three months' leave. Remember the Red River Valley—and the family native life-forms?"

"Hah! And Cygnus VII—the purple world with the Rainbow Women?"

"Took me three weeks to get that dye off me. Thought at first it was a new disease. Flames! I'd love to ship out again!"

Corgo paused in mid-move.

"Hmm . . . You know, Emil . . . It might be that you could."

"What do you mean?"

Corgo finished his move.

"Aboard the *Wallaby*. It's here, in Unassociated Territory, waiting for me. I'm Captain, and crew—and everything—all by myself, right now. Mala helps some, but—you know, I could use a First Mate. Be like old times."

Emil replaced the knight he had raised, looked up, looked back down.

"I—I don't know what to say, Cap. I never thought you'd offer me a berth . . ."

"Why not? I could use a good man. Lots of action, like the old days. Plenty cash. No cares. We want three months' leave on Tau Ceti and we write our own bloody orders. We take it!"

"I—I do want to space again, Cap—bad. But—no, I couldn't . . ."

"Why not, Emil? Why not? It'd be just like before."

"I don't know how to say it, Cap . . . But when we—burnt places, before—well, it was criminals—pirates, Code-breakers—you know. Now . . . Well, now I hear you burn—just people. Uh, non-Code-breakers. Like, just plain civilians. Well—I could not."

Corgo did not answer. Emil moved his knight.

"I hate them, Emil," he said, after a time. "Every lovin' one of them, I hate them. Do you know what they did on Brild? To the Drillen?"

"Yessir. But it wasn't civilians, and not the miners. It was not *everybody*. It wasn't every lovin' one of them, sir.—I just couldn't. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad, Emil."

"I mean, sir, there are some as I wouldn't mind burnin', Code or no Code. But not the way you do it, sir. And I'd do it for free to those as have it coming."

"Huh!"

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Corgo moved his one bishop.

"That's why my money is no good with you?"

"No, sir. That's not it, sir. Well maybe part . . . But only part. I just couldn't take pay for helping someone I—respected, admired."

"You use the past tense."

"Yessir. But I still think you got a raw deal, and what they did to the Drillen was wrong and bad and—evil—but you can't hate everybody for that, sir, because *everybody* didn't do it."

"They countenanced it, Emil—which is just as bad. I am able to hate them all for that alone. And people are all alike, all the same. I burn without discrimination these days, because it doesn't really matter *who*. The guilt is equally distributed. Mankind is commonly culpable."

"No, sir, begging your pardon, sir, but in a system as big as Interstel not everybody knows what everybody else is up to. There are those feeling the same way you do, and there are those as don't give a damn, and those who just don't know a lot of what's going on, but who would do something about it if they knew, soon enough."

"It's your move, Emil."

"Yessir."

"You know, I wish you'd accepted a commission, Emil. You had the chance. You'd have been a good officer."

"No, sir. I'd not have been a good officer. I'm too easy-going. The men would've walked all over me."

"It's a pity. But it's always that way. You know? The good ones are too weak, too easy-going. Why is that?"

"Dunno, sir."

After a couple moves:

"You know, if I were to give it up—the burning, I mean—and just do some ordinary, decent smuggling with the *Wallaby*, it would be okay. With me. Now. I'm tired. I'm so damned tired I'd just like to sleep—oh, four, five, six years, I think. Supposing I stopped the burning and just shipped stuff here and there—would you sign on with me then?"

"I'd have to think about it, Cap."

"Do that, then. Please. I'd like to have you along."

"Yessir. Your move, sir."

IT would not have happened that he'd have been found by his actions, because he *did* stop the burning; it would not have happened—because he was dead on ICI's books—that anyone would have been looking for him. It happened, though—because of a surfeit of *xmili* and good will on the part of the hunters.

On the eve of the breaking of the fellowship, nostalgia followed high spirits.

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Benedick had never had a friend before, you must remember. Now he had three, and he was leaving them.

The Lynx had ingested much good food and drink, and the good company of simple, maimed people, whose neuroses were unvitiated with normal sophistication—and he had enjoyed this.

Sandor's sphere of human relations had been expanded by approximately a third, and he had slowly come to consider himself at least an honorary member of the vast flux which he had only known before as humanity, or Others.

So, in the library, drinking, and eating and talking, they returned to the hunt. Dead tigers are always the best kind.

Of course, it wasn't long before Benedick picked up the heart, and held it as a connoisseur would an art object—gently, and with a certain mingling of awe and affection.

As they sat there, an odd sensation crept into the pudgy paranorm's stomach and rose slowly, like gas, until his eyes burned.

"I—I'm reading," he said.

"Of course"—the Lynx.

"Yes"—Sandor.

"Really!"

"Naturally"—the Lynx. "He is on Disten, fifth world of Blake's System, in a native hut outside Landear—"

"No"—Sandor. "He is on Philip's World, in Delles-by-the-Sea."

They laughed, the Lynx a deep rumble, Sandor a gasping chuckle.

"No," said Benedick. "He is in transit, aboard the *Wallaby*. He had just phased and his mind is still mainly awake. He is running a cargo of ambergris to the Tau Ceti system, fifth planet—Tholmen. After that he plans on vacationing in the Red River Valley of the third planet—Cardiff. Along with the Drillen and the puppy, he has a crewman with him this time. I can't read anything but that it's a retired Guardsman."

"By the holy Light of the Great and Glorious Flame!"

"We know they never did find his ship . . ."

". . . And his body was not recovered. —Could *you* be mistaken, Benedick? Reading something, someone else. . . ?"

"No."

"What should we do, Lynx?"—Sandor.

"An unethical person might be inclined to forget it. It is a closed case. We *have* been paid and dismissed."

"True."

"But think of when he strikes again . . ."

". . . It would be because of us, our failure."

"Yes."

". . . And many would die."

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". . . And much machinery destroyed, and an insurance association defrauded."

"Yes."

". . . Because of us."

"Yes."

"So we should report it"—Lynx.

"Yes."

"It is unfortunate . . ."

"Yes."

". . . But it will be good to have worked together this final time."

"Yes. It will. Very."

"Tholmen, in Tau Ceti, and he just phased?"—Lynx.

"Yes."

"I'll call, and they'll be waiting for him in T.C."

". . . I told you," said the weeping paranorm. "He wasn't ready to die."

Sandor smiled and raised his glass with his flesh-colored hand.

There was still some work to be done.

WHEN the *Wallaby* hit Tau-Ceti all hell broke loose.

Three fully-manned Guardships, like onto the *Wallaby* herself, were waiting.

ICI had quarantined the entire system for three days. There could be no mistaking the ebony toadstool when it appeared on the screen. No identification was solicited.

The tractor beams missed it the first time, however, and the *Wallaby's* new First Mate fired every weapon aboard the ship simultaneously, in all directions, as soon as the alarm sounded. This had been one of Corgo's small alterations in fire-control, because of the size of his operations: no safety circuits; and it was a suicide-ship, if necessary: it was a lone wolf with no regard for *any* pack: one central control —touch it, and the *Wallaby* became a porcupine with laser-quills, stabbing into anything in every direction.

Corgo prepared to phase again, but it took him forty-three seconds to do so.

During that time he was struck twice by the surviving Guardship.

Then he was gone.

Time and Chance, which govern all things, and sometimes like to pass themselves off as Destiny, then seized upon the *Wallaby*, the puppy, the Drillen, First Mate Emil, and the man without a heart.

Corgo had set no course when he had in-phased. There had been no time.

The two blasts from the Guardship had radically altered the *Wallaby's* course, and had burnt out 23 fast-phase projectors.

The *Wallaby* jumped blind, and with a broken leg.

Continuum-impact racked the crew. The hull repaired rents in its skin.

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They continued for 39 hours and 23 minutes, taking turns at sedation, watching for the first warning on the panel.

The *Wallaby* held together, though.

But where they had gotten to no one knew, least of all a weeping paranorm who had monitored the battle and all of Corgo's watches, despite the continuum-impact and a hangover.

But suddenly Benedick knew fear:

"Hes' about to phase-out. I'm going to have to drop him now."

"Why?"—the Lynx.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, of course not!"

"Well, neither does he. Supposing he pops out in the middle of a sun, or in some atmosphere —moving at that speed?"

"Well, supposing he does? He dies."

"Exactly. Continuum-impact is bad enough. I've never been in a man's mind when he died—and I don't think I could take it. Sorry. I just won't do it. I think I might die myself if it happened. I'm so tired now . . . I'll just have to check him out later."

With that he collapsed and could not be roused.

SO, Corgo's heart went back into its jar, and the jar went back into the lower righthand drawer of Sandor's desk, and none of the hunters heard the words of Corgo's answer to his First Mate after the phasing-out:

"Where are we?—The Comp says the nearest thing is a little pingpong ball of a world called Dombeck, not noted for anything. We'll have to put down there for repairs, somewhere off the beaten track. We need projectors."

So they landed the *Wallaby* and banged on its hull as the hunters slept, some five hundred forty-two miles away.

They were grinding out the projector sockets shortly after Sandor had been tucked into his bed.

They reinforced the hull in three places while the Lynx ate half a ham, three biscuits, two apples and a pear, and drank half a liter of Dombeck's best Mosel.

They rewired shorted circuits as Benedick smiled and dreamt of Bright Bad Barby the Bouncing Baby, in the days of her youth.

And Corgo took the light-boat and headed for a town three hundred miles away, just as the pale sun of Dombeck began to rise.

"He's here!" cried Benedick, flinging wide the door to the Lynx' room and rushing up to the bedside. "He's—"

Then he was unconscious, for the Lynx may not be approached suddenly as he sleeps.

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When he awakened five minutes later, he was lying on the bed and the entire household stood about him. There was a cold cloth on his forehead and his throat felt crushed.

"My brother," said the Lynx, "you should never approach a sleeping man in such a manner."

"B-but he's here," said Benedick, gagging. "Here on Dombeck! I don't even need Sandor to tell!"

"Art sure thou hast not imbibed too much?"

"No, I tell you he's here!" He sat up, flung away the cloth. "That little city, Coldstream—" He pointed through the wall. "—I was there just a week ago. I *know* the place!"

"You have had a dream—"

"Wet your Flame! but I've not! I held his heart in these hands and saw it!"

The Lynx winced at the profanity, but considered the possibility.

"Then come with us to the library and see if you can read it again."

"You better believe I can!"

At that moment Corgo was drinking a cup of coffee and waiting for the town to wake up. He was considering his First Mate's resignation:

"I never wanted to burn anyone, Cap. Least of all, the Guard. I'm sorry, but that's it. No more for me. Leave me here and give me passage home to Phillip's—that's all I want. I know you didn't want it the way it happened, but if I keep shipping with you it might happen again some day. Probably will. They got your number somehow, and I couldn't *ever* do *that* again. I'll help you fix the *Wallaby*, then I'm out. Sorry."

Corgo sighed and ordered a second coffee. He glanced at the clock on the diner wall. Soon, soon . . .

"That clock, that wall, that window! It's the diner where I had lunch last week, in Coldstream!" said Benedick, blinking moistly.

"Do you think all that continuum-impact. . . ?"—the Lynx.

"I don't know"—Sandor.

"How can we check?"

"Call the flamin' diner and ask them to describe their only customer!"—Benedick.

"*That* is a very good idea"—the Lynx.

The Lynx moved to the phone-unit on Sandor's desk.

Sudden, as everything concerning the case had been, was the Lynx's final deicision:

"Your flyer, brother Sandor. May I borrow it?"

"Why, yes. Surely . . ."

"I will now call the local ICI office and requisition a laser-cannon. They have been ordered to cooperate with us without

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question, and the orders are still in effect. My executioner's rating has never been suspended. It appears that if we ever want to see this job completed we must do it ourselves. It won't take long to mount the gun on your flyer.—Benedick, stay with him every minute now. He still has to buy the equipment, take it back, and install it. Therefore, we should have sufficient time. Just stay with him and advise me as to his movements."

"Check."

"Are you sure it's the right way to go about it?"—Sandor.

"I'm sure . . ."

AS the cannon was being delivered, Corgo made his purchases. As it was being installed, he loaded the light-boat and departed. As it was tested, on a tree stump Aunt Faye had wanted removed for a long while, he was aloft and heading toward the desert.

As he crossed the desert, Benedick watched the rolling dunes, scrub-shrubs and darting *rabbophers* through his eyes.

He also watched the instrument-panel.

As the Lynx began his journey, Mala and Dilk were walking about the hull of the *Wallaby*. Mala wondered if the killing was over. She was not sure she liked the new Corgo so much as she did the avenger. She wondered whether the change would be permanent. She hoped not . . .

The Lynx maintained radio contact with Benedick.

Sandor drank *xmili* and smiled.

After a time, Corgo landed.

The Lynx was racing across the sands from the opposite direction.

They began unloading the light-boat.

The Lynx sped on.

"I am near it now. Five minutes," he radioed back.

"Then I'm out?"—Benedick.

"Not yet"—the reply.

"Sorry, but you know what I said. I won't be there when he dies."

"All right. I can take it from here"—the Lynx.

Which is how, when the Lynx came upon the scene, he saw a dog and a man and an ugly but intelligent quadraped beside the *Wallaby*.

His first blast hit the ship. The man fell.

The quadraped ran, and he burnt it.

The dog dashed through the port into the ship.

The Lynx brought the flyer about for another pass.

There was another man, circling around from the other side of the ship, where he had been working.

The man raised his hand and there was a flash of light.

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Corgo's death-ring discharged its single laser beam.

It crossed the distance between them, penetrated the hull of the flyer, passed through the Lynx' left arm above the elbow, and continued on through the roof of the vehicle.

The Lynx cried out, fought the controls, as Corgo dashed into the *Wallaby*.

Then he triggered the cannon, and again, and again and again, circling, until the *Wallaby* was a smouldering ruin in the middle of a sea of fused sand.

Still did he burn that ruin, finally calling back to Benedick Benedict and asking his one question.

"Nothing"—the reply.

Then he turned and headed back, setting the autopilot and opening the first-aid kit.

". . . Then he went in to hit the *Wallaby's* guns, but I hit him first"—Lynx.

"No"—Benedick.

"What meanest thou 'no'? *I* was there."

"So was I, for awhile. I *had* to see how he felt."

"And?"

"He went in for the puppy, Dilk, held it in his arms, said to it, 'I am sorry.' "

"Whatever, he is dead now and we have finished. It is over"—Sandor.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Let us then drink to a job well done, before we part for good."

"Yes."

"Yes."

And they did.

While there wasn't much left of the *Wallaby* or its Captain, ICI positively identified a synthetic heart found still beating, erratically, amidst the hot wreckage.

Corgo was dead, and that was it.

He should have known what he was up against, and turned himself in to the proper authorities. How can you hope to beat a man who can pick the lock to your mind, a man who dispatched forty-eight men and seventeen malicious alien life-forms, and a man who knows every damn street in the galaxy.

He should have known better than to go up against Sandor Sandor, Benedick Benedict and Lynx Links. He should, he should have known.

For their real names, of course, are Tisiphone, Alecto and Maegaera. They are the Furies. They arise from chaos and deliver revenge; they convey confusion and disaster to those who abandon the law and forsake the way, who offend against the light and violate the life, who take the power of Flame, like a lightning-rod, in their two too mortal hands.

THE END

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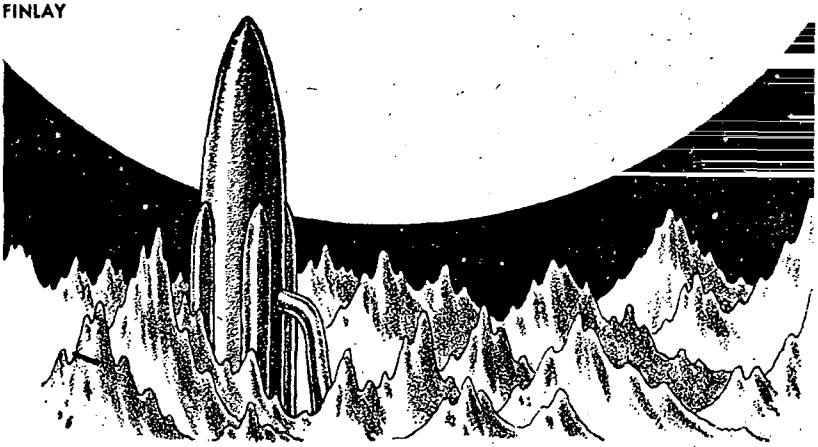
AFTER A JUDGEMENT DAY

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Not to look at Earth, was the main thing. It was such a natural thing to do, to lean back in your chair and look up through the ceiling window and see the gray-and-bluish globe of Earth spinning away there against the blackness and the stars. But if you started looking, pretty soon you were remembering, and there was no use remembering now, no use at all.

MARTINSEN lowered his head so that he would not see the window and the Earth. He looked instead at the complex bank of tell-tales across the room from him. He looked at them for a long time before he really saw them, and noticed that one had changed. A tiny red star had appeared in that section.

Illustrator FINLAY



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He reached and punched a button on the desk, and then leaned and said into an intercom,

"Ellam, Sixteen is coming in."

There was no answer.

"Ellam?"

He knew his voice was searching through every part of the Station, down the gleaming metal corridors, into the small laboratories and the rock supply-caverns below. He waited, but there was still no answer from Howard Ellam.

Martinsen made a tired sound, between weariness and anger, and rose to his feet. He thought he knew what had happened, though he had taken precautions against it. He walked across the room and started down a corridor, a rumpled, soiled figure in the coverall he had not changed for days, his grizzled-gray head held up, but his shoulders sagging and his feet scuffing the plastic floor.

No sound broke the silence except the gentle purr of the aerators. There was no one in the Station but Ellam and himself. Carelli had taken the two others of the staff back to Earth with him weeks before, in one of the two emergency-ferries.

"I'll be back," he had told Martinsen, "as soon as I get things untangled down there. You and Ellam stay and handle the Charlies as they come in."

Carelli hadn't come back. Martinsen felt now that he never would come back, he or anyone else. They still had the second ferry. But they also had their orders.

HE walked along in the silence, remembering when he had first walked this corridor, tingling with excitement and anticipation, his first ten minutes inside Lunar Station. How he had thought of the work he would be doing here, of the importance of that work to everyone on Earth, now and in the future. The future? My God, that was a laugh.

He went on through the silent rooms and passages until he found Ellam. He was sitting. Just sitting. He looked normal, except for the fact that he hadn't shaved, but when Martinsen saw the glassiness of his fixed stare, he looked around until he found the bottle of pills, half-spilled across a table.

Martinsen sighed. There was no liquor in the Station, but there were tranquilizers. He had thought he had found and hidden them all, but apparently Ellam still had a store. Well, that was one way to take catastrophe. Wrap your mind up in cotton-wool so you can't think about it. He put the pills in his pocket. There was nothing he could do but leave Ellam to come out of it.

He went back to C Room and

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sat there, watching the little red star slowly change position on the board as Probe Sixteen returned toward the Moon. The other probes, all recalled at the same time, would be coming in during the next few days, until all the Charlies had returned. And then?

He found that he was staring up at Earth again. How many people were still alive there? Many? Any? He thought of calling again but there was never any answer any more, and later would be just as good.

It was very much later when he finally went down to Communications and tried the call. He put it through three times, and waited after each time, but there was no answer. Not a flicker.

The anger rose again in Martinsen. *Everybody* on Earth couldn't be dead. Not everybody. The A-Plague might have swept the globe and wiped out hundreds of millions, but surely someone down at Main Base would have survived, and why didn't that someone answer?

But that someone still living at Main Base . . . would he be able to answer if he wanted to? He just might not be able to utilize the complex communications instruments. The whole little staff here in the Station had, as a matter of course, been taught how. But that certainly did not apply to all the thousands who had worked at Main Base, and if the survivors didn't know . . .

Martinsen shook his head. Even if that had happened, even if Carelli had found Main Base depopulated when he went back down there, still, Carelli could have called and said so. Unless . . . unless Carelli and Muto and Jennings had been hit by the A-Plague before they had had time to find out what conditions were, and to get back to Communications and call back. But if that had happened, it meant that the A-Plague was triumphant over Earth and all its billions.

It was funny, in a way, Martinsen thought. For decades, people had been afraid of atomic destruction. It was nuclear war they had feared most, but also they had been afraid of fallout and what it might do to their bodies. But nuclear war had never happened, and fallout had been cut to a safe level. The only trouble was that a level that did not affect human bodies might very well affect other and smaller bodies. Like the bodies of bacteria.

A SERIES of radioactive-induced mutations had occurred in a species of hitherto not-very-harmful bacteria. The scientists had finally wakened up to what was going on. But by

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then it was too late, the most fearful bacteria in the world's history had appeared and were spreading, and the A-Plague was let loose. Its first incursions, with previously unheard-of high mortality rates, had been in South America. The world health organizations had taken alarm. There had been swift measures of quarantine, concentrated searches for a vaccine. But it was too late for all that, and the messages that came through to the five horrified men in Lunar Station were of cities, then countries, then whole nations, going silent. Until Main Base, too, went silent.

And five men were left marooned in Lunar Station, and then after Carelli and Jennings and Muto went back down, there were only two men, and one of them kept doping up on pills to forget a wife and kids, so you might say he was alone, with a dead or dying world down there, and . . .

"Knock it off," Martinsen told himself. "You can cry later."

The telltales showed more little red stars, more probes, approaching the Moon. The beautiful, slim metal ships in which no human had ever ridden yet, were returning. They had quested to the nearest stars and their planets, moving in overdrive, and those in them had walked under the radiation of strange suns. But the quest had been suddenly interrupted, a hyperspace signal had flung an abrupt command, and now the probes were coming back in.

He thought it was probably all for nothing. What use was it to record carefully all the knowledge the Charlies would bring back with them, if there was nobody left alive on Earth to use it? But Carelli had left him responsible and he couldn't just sit and throw away the first rewards of the whole project.

Cybernetic-Humanoid And Related Life Study, was the project's name. CHARLS, it was more often called, and of course the cyborgs that went out in the probes were at once nicknamed Charlies. And after a time, after Probe 16 had automatically made its landing and entered the reception hangars of Lunar Station, Martinsen heard the soft footsteps of Charlie Sixteen in the passageway, going quietly toward the analysis laboratories.

Martinsen got up and went to the labs. On the spot that had his number painted on the floor, Charlie Sixteen stood silent and unmoving. Martinsen started his preliminary examination, and despite his conviction that it was all for nothing now, he was quickly caught up in the routine.

"Heart-pump, kidneys, cardiovascular system, all look good," he muttered. "Looks like more

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calcium mobilization than we expected, but it'll take time to find out. Let's see how your hypothalamus reacted, Charlie."

Charlie Sixteen stood and said nothing, for he could not speak. Neither could he hear, nor think. He was not a man, but a mechanical analog of humanity used to study the effect of unusual environments on a pseudo-human body. Cyborgs, they had been called from the first one in the early 1960's . . . cybernetic organisms.

He looked grotesquely like a man with his skin off, for through his transparent plastic tissues you could clearly see his artificial heart-pump, the clear tubes of his arteries and veins, the alloy "bones", the cleverly simulated lung-sacs, visible for close study through an aperture in the rib-cage that gaped like a ghastly wound. People who first saw cyborgs always found them horribly lifelike, but that first impression always faded fast, and a cyborg after that was no more lifelike than a centrifuge or a television set.

THE staff at Lunar Station had had toward the Charlies something of the attitude of a window-dresser handling clothes-mannequins. But these mannequins were far more than stiff wax figures. These could walk, could obey the commands programmed into their electric nerve-systems. These mannequins were not made to stand in shop windows, but to plumb the stars. In the probes, at accelerations no human frame could endure, they would be sent to the worlds of foreign suns, and would walk those worlds and breathe their air and react to their gravitation, and then the probes would bring them back again to Lunar Station and the men there would ascertain the effects of the alien environments on these human analogs.

It had taken a long time for the Station staff to get the cyborgs ready and programmed to act as humanity's scouts into the stars. And during that time the men had humorously given them the Charlie names, in the way in which one had given a car or a boat a name, and had made small jokes about Charlie Nine being brighter than the others, and Charlie Fourteen being a coward who didn't want to go to the stars, and the like. And now, to the infinitely lonely Martinsen, the joke became almost reality, and he talked to the cyborg he was examining as to a living man.

He had gone to the hangars and had got from Probe 16 the tapes that held a record of the faroff coasts which that slim metal missile had explored. He had run through the tapes, first

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the visual ones that showed the tawny-red desert on which Charlie Sixteen had walked beneath two shadowed moons, and then the tapes on which the sensor instruments had recorded all the physical data of that world. He pondered certain points in those records, and had returned to his examination of Charlie Sixteen, not even hearing the muted metallic sounds from the hangers that told of two more probes making their automatic return and re-entry.

"I *think*," he told Charlie Sixteen, "that you're a slightly damaged cyborg. Consider yourself lucky that that's all . . . if you were a man, you'd be dead."

Consider yourself lucky, Charlie! If you were a man, you'd know, and think, and remember and . . .

MARTINSEN pushed that thought out of his mind and went on with his examination. Charlies Eight and Eleven had come in by the time he finished with Sixteen, walking silently into the lab and then standing motionless on the painted numbers where their programming ended. Martinsen got the tapes from their two probes and started on them, unwilling to stop work even when the hours passed and he grew tired, unwilling to go back to the chair and sit and look at Earth.

"Now why is your temperature down six degrees?" he muttered to Charlie Eight. "You went in and out of hypothermia perfectly the first time, but the second time you didn't come quite back to normal, and . . ."

"Are you out of your mind, talking to a Charlie?"

Howard Ellam's voice cut across, and Martinsen turned to find Ellam standing in the doorway, his eyes red-rimmed, his body swaying a little, but looking awake enough.

"Just thinking aloud," Martinsen said.

"Thinking?" Ellam jeered. "Things have got bad, all right, when we start talking to cyborgs."

"I'd as lief talk to a Charlie as to a man coked up on sleep-pills," flared Martinsen.

Ellam stared at him and then laughed. "Want to hear a sick joke? The last two men in the world were lock up together, and what happened? They got cabin-fever."

He laughed and laughed and then he stopped laughing. He said dully, "I'm sorry, Mart."

"Oh, forget it," said Martinsen. "But forget about us being the last two men, will you? No plague, not even an A-plague, takes everyone. There's always a few survivors."

"Sure, there's always a few survivors," said Ellam. "Kill off

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all the whooping-cranes, and there still turns out to be a few survivors, for a little while. But they're finished, as a species. We're finished."

"Bull," said Martinsen without conviction.

He went doggedly on with his examination of the Charlies, his notations of their reactions to specific environments. Ellam, as though regretting his outburst, helped him set up the bioinstrumentation, and the measuring of effects. Mineral dynamics was Ellam's special field, and he was quick and precise in this. More probes, more missiles homing from the shores of infinity, kept coming in. Presently all but five of the eighteen Charlies stood in the lab.

"Charlie Six hit it lucky," said Ellam, after a while. "There's a world out there at Proxima that would be just fine for humans. If there were any humans to go there."

Martinsen made no answer, but went on with his work. Presently, with a what's-the-use shrug, Ellam quit and went out of the lab.

Martinsen supposed he had gone back to his pills. But when he finally stopped working, too tired to be accurate any longer, and went back through the Station, he found Ellam sitting in C room looking up through the window at Earth.

"Never a light," said Ellam. "It used to be we'd see the lights that were cities, through the little refractor, but it's all dark now."

"The lights may be out, but people are still alive," said Martinsen.

"Oh, sure. A few of them. Sick and dying, or afraid they'll soon be sick and dying, and all the already dead around them."

"Will you *please* knock it off?" said Martinsen.

ELLAM did not answer. After a moment Martinsen turned away. He did not feel like sleeping now. He went back to the labs.

He had turned out the lights there when he left. He walked back in, dull with fatigue, and the bar of light from the passageway struck in through the dark rooms and littered off chrome flanges and bars, and showed the quiet faces, rows and rows of them, of the Charlies standing there, each on his number, not moving, not making a sound. And of a sudden, after all his long familiarity with them, a horror of them struck Martinsen and he stood shivering. What was he doing in this place upon an alien world, with these unhuman figures, all looking toward him from the shadows? He was a man, and this was not a place for men. Things had gone

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too fast. Once he had been a boy in a little Ohio country town, and its quiet streets and white houses and old elms and maples must be still much the same, and oh God, he wanted to go back there. But there would be nothing there but death now, man had gone too far and too fast indeed, he was trapped here with unhuman travesties who stood silently looking at him, looking and looking . . .

He switched on the lights with a shaking hand, and suddenly there was a change, the Charlies were just Charlies, just machines that had never lived and never would live. Nerves, he thought. It had better not happen too often, for if it did he would end up running and screaming through the Station, and that was no way for a man to end. He could take pills like Ellam, but work was a better anodyne. He worked.

For days he worked, making the routine examination of every Charlie, noting everything down and not asking himself what eyes would ever read his notes. And when all that was done, and he knew more about the worlds of foreign stars than man had ever known before, he set himself to repair those Charlies that had been damaged by radiation, poisonous atmospheres, or abnormal gravitation.

Sometimes Ellam would help him, when he was not in a state of semi-stupor from his pills. He usually worked in heavy silence, but one time when the repair of Charlies was almost completed, Ellam asked,

"What's it all for, anyway? Nobody will ever be sending these Charlies out again."

"I don't know," Martinsen answered. And then, after a moment, "Maybe I will."

"You? The Station will be dead and you with it before they'd ever get back."

"I wasn't thinking of having them come back," Martinsen answered vaguely.

An unusual sound of some kind awoke him later from his sleep. He sat up and listened and then he realized its origin. It came from the hangar of the emergency ferries.

Martinsen ran all the way there. His heart was pumping and he had an icy dread on him, the fear of being altogether alone. He was in time to catch Ellam before Ellam had got the little ferry set up for its automatic launch.

"Ellam, you can't go!"

"I'm going," said Ellam stonily.

"There's nothing but death waiting on Earth!"

Ellam jeered. "What's waiting here? It may be a little longer in coming, but not much."

Martinsen gripped his arm. He

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had come almost to hate Ellam, during these last days, but now suddenly Ellam was infinitely precious to him as the last defense against ultimate solitude.

"Listen," he said. "Wait a little longer, till I get the Charlies all repaired. Then I'll go with you."

Ellam stared at him. "You?"

"Do you think I want to be left alone here? Anyway, it's as you say, just a matter of time if we stay here. But I have one more thing I want to do."

After a moment Ellam said, "All right, if you're going with me. I'll wait a little while."

MARTINSEN had no illusions about the implications of his promise. The chances were that he and Ellam would both die of the plague very soon after they reached Earth. Still, death there was only a very high probability, whereas it was a certainty here when the Station machinery stopped operating. And that being so, there was not much room for choice.

But the resolution that had been forming in him was suddenly, sharply crystallized now. Ellam would not wait too long, he knew. He would have little time to do the thing he wanted to do.

He set to work furiously in Communications, preparing master-tapes. The first one was an audio-visual vocabulary tape in which the visual picture of a thing or an action was conjoined with Martinsen's speaking the noun or verb that defined it. It would not be a very large vocabulary but it would contain the key words, and he thought that with it an intelligence of any reasonably high level could quickly advance to expanding interpretations.

He was engaged in finshing this vocabulary-tape when Ellam came into the Communications room and watched him puzzledly for a while. Then he said puzzledly,

"What in the world are you doing?"

Martinsen said, "I'm going to send the probes and Charlies out, before we leave."

"Send them where?"

"Everywhere they can go. Each one will take with them a copy of the tapes I'm preparing."

Ellam said, after a moment, "I get it. Messages in bottles from a drowning person. In other words, the last will and testament of a dying species."

"I still don't think our species will die," Martinsen said. "But even if it lives, it's bound to slip back . . . maybe a long way and for a long time. Everything shouldn't be lost . . ."

"It's a good idea," said Ellam. "I'll help you. Here, give me the mike." And he spoke mockingly into it, "This is the deathbed

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message of a race who were such damn fools that they managed to kill themselves off. And our solemn warning is, don't ever learn too much. Stay up in the trees."

Martinsen took the microphone away from him, but he sat brooding after Ellam had left. After all, there was truth in the bitter assertion that man was responsible for his own destruction. But was it the whole truth?

He suddenly realized his inadequacy for this task. He was no philosopher or seer. He was, outside of his own specialized field of science, a thoroughly average man. How could he take it upon himself to decide what was important to tell, and what was not? Yet there was no one else to do so.

THE documentary factual knowledge, the science and the history, were what he began with and they were not so terribly difficult a problem. The Station contained a large microfilm library, and it was easy enough to set up the microfilm equipment so that selected factual knowledge fed directly onto the tapes. But there were also music, art, literature, many other things, and some of all that must survive. He felt more and more overwhelmed by the task as he muddled along trying to make his selections.

How did you evaluate things? Were Newton's Laws of Motion more important than Mozart's quartets? Were the Crusades more worthy of being remembered than Plato's Dialogues? Could he throw away forever the work of long-dead master artists, just because there was no room for a picture of the Parthenon? So much had been done in the world, so many causes valiantly fought, so much beauty created, so much toil and thought and dreaming, how could one pick and choose?

Martinsen went doggedly on with it, and when the last master-tape was finished he knew how faulty and wretched a job he had done. But there was no time to try again.

He sat for a while, looking at the last tape. He felt somehow that he could not let this imperfect record end without adding his own small word.

He said, after a little while, into the microphone, "The thing that has happend to us was of our own doing. But it came not so much from evil as from fecklessness."

He brooded for a moment and then went on. "We inherited curiosity from the ape, and curiosity unlocked many doors for us. The door of power, the door of space. And finally, if all perish, the door of death. Let this be said of us, that we preferred the risk of disaster to the safety of

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always staying still. But whether this was good or bad, I do not know."

Wearily, he shut off the machine. There was nothing left to do but to run the master-tapes through a duplicator until there was a full set of duplicate tapes for each of the eighteen probes. Then he went to the laboratory where the Charlies were.

Ellam, because he was impatient to get this done and leave, had agreed to program the Charlies. He looked almost cheerful now as he worked with Charlie Three. The endplates of the electrical "nerves" had been removed, and a chattering instrument was feeding code into the cyborg's memory-banks, code-signals that were orders. Orders about course in space, orders covering the landing on any planet which looked habitable or inhabited, orders on delivering the tapes only if certain conditions that indicated civilization were present, orders to go on to other stars and other possible planets if they were not. The probes had an almost unlimited range in overdrive, and some would go far indeed.

"Charlie Three is going to Vega," said Ellam. "And from there, if necessary, on to Lyra 431, and maybe a lot farther. He's going to see things, is Charlie Three. They all are."

Martinsen felt a pang of regret. Once men had thought that in time they too would see those things. But it was not to be, and the cyborgs would go in their place, weird lifeless successors of man.

He thought of a poem he had read during his rummaging of the library. What was it Chesterton had written?

"For the end of the world
was long ago,
And we all dwell today
as children of a second birth,
Like a strange people left on
Earth
After a judgment day."

The cyborgs were not people and instead of being left on Earth they were to fare into the wider universe. Yet, stillborn and lifeless though they were, they were yet in a sense the children of men, carrying out to unguessable places the story of their creators.

The programming was finished. There was a wait. Then, at the ordered moment, the cyborgs walked quietly out of the laboratory, one after another.

From the window in C Room, Martinsen and Ellam watched as the probes took off. They raced into the sky as though eager to go, vanishing from view as they went rapidly into overdrive to cross the vast and empty spaces.

Where would be the final ends

(Continued on page 131

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FACT

ASSEMBLING A

There's a long voyage awaiting man Out There. But even the longest journey begins with a single step.

MAN'S initial effort to break his terrestrial bonds and penetrate the fringes of space, is still limited both in performance and scope. Hampered by the necessity of creating an entirely new technology, he is equally restrained by a fear of his own imagination—a hesitancy to accept the really soaring concepts that the ultimate conquest of space demands. This is due mainly to the limitations of the engineering mind, to that professional conservatism that looks askance at radical ideas and mechanisms as yet unproven in actual practice.

However, like the bird from the egg, all human advance must originate in the airy stuff of dreams, from "screwball" visions which spur more mundane minds into creating the working components that turn dream into actuality. To be of any real value, these prophetic notions must of course, have some basic solidity. However weird it may seem at first sight, the dream must rest upon a firm foundation of practical physics and sound engineering principles. Despite the multiplicity of design headaches involved, the idea has to be finally convertible into useful hardware. It is from this sort of realistic imagery, that I present to the readers of AMAZING, a new series of pictorial prophecies—scientifically solid rungs in the ladder of future achievement, up which man will some day ascend to the stars.

At present, we are still in the stage of small beginnings, of tiny electronically controlled vehicles, barely capable of entering and leaving earthly orbits. The moon has been circled and photographed, monkeys and dogs have been successfully returned from space flights and communications satellites are in operation. The first human be-

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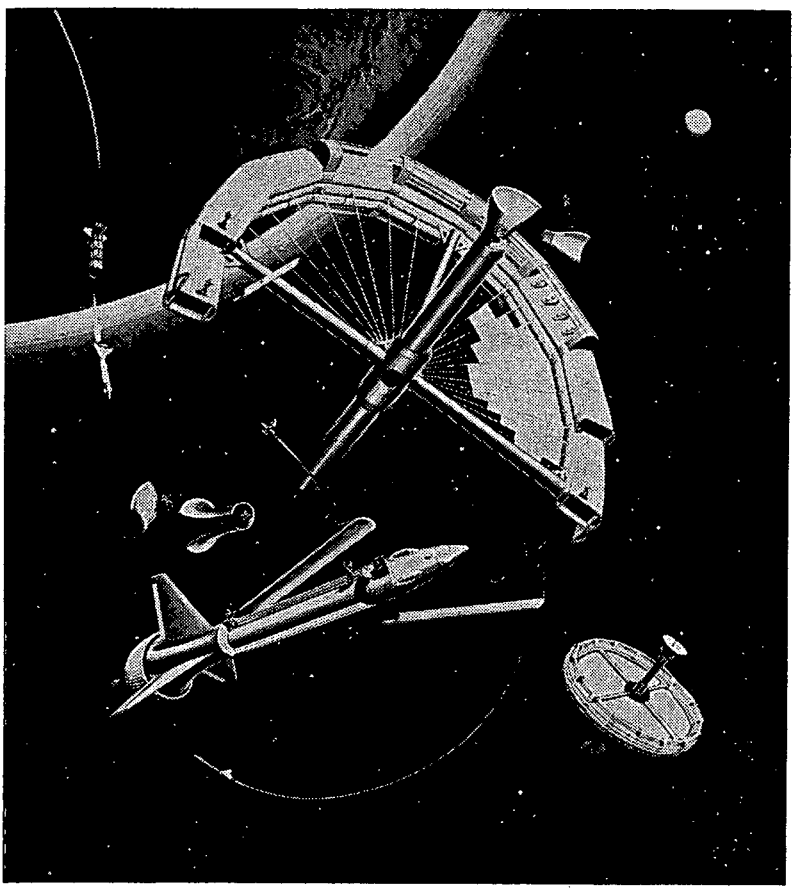
STATION IN SPACE

By FRANK TINSLEY



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ing has not yet flown in orbit although he is on the verge of trying. When he does, he will be little more than a passenger, carried along for the ride merely to demonstrate that he can make it. The only real purpose of our Project Mercury and of its Russian opposite number, is to prove that man can exist, at least for a little while, in a properly designed space vehicle.

Of course, this is a necessary first step. However, the human brain with its unique capacity for observation, conclusion and decision, will be of no use to science until man is able to live comfortably in space for weeks or months on end, to engage in experimentation and research, to record and transmit his findings back to earth, and to travel to and from his spatial laboratories at will and in reasonable safety. To do all this successfully, we require what has come to be called a "space station".

The space station is a large manned satellite, permanently orbiting around a heavenly body such as the earth, moon, or mars. The particular design shown in this picture, is intended for assembly in an earth orbit, of prefabricated parts rocketed up from an earth base. Extracting usable cold from the icy chill of space and generating heat and electricity from solar rays, it needs no artificial power supply. Using the principle of the balanced aquarium, it force-grows a basic vegetation such as algae in sunlit chemical tubes, mounted around the revolving rim of the wheel-like structure. In its growth process, this vegetation absorbs the carbon-dioxide exhaled by the crew and produces a plentiful supply of oxygen for fresh air. It also provides a protein rich food for emergency rations—a flour like form of dried algae which recent sun-drying techniques have made quite palatable and which can be flavored and used as a food additive in various ways. In addition to algae, most of our more familiar grains, table vegetables and flowers, can be grown in a similar manner. In the illustration, compartmentalized sets of hydroponic tubes and their supporting brackets, are shown partly installed in upper level "greenhouses".

Revolving around its central axis, the rim is subjected to a degree of centrifugal force governed by its rotational speed. This can be nicely calculated to produce an exact simulation of our earthly gravitational pull. Thus, the crew can move around freely, equipment can be mounted and supplies stored on shelves and tables, precisely as they are on earth. No magnetism is needed, no special shoes or bases, no attractive floors or storage sur-

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faces. This normal gravitation, plus its other features, makes our space station self-sustaining in all the necessary basic fields —air, food and power. With a controlled optimum atmosphere, comfortable living quarters, sufficient exercise areas and regular supply and transport service, it is habitable for considerable periods by a single crew. In practice, however, scientific and operating personnel will be alternated at reasonable intervals, as is now done at arctic bases and atomic submarines on station.

THE earth-satellite station can be built in any selected orbit, ranging from the altitudes of present day vehicles—a thousand miles or so—on up to an orbit some 22,300 miles out. At this latter distance, the station completes one round trip every twenty-four hours. Thus traveling at the same rotational speed as the earth, the station remains in an apparently stationary spot in the sky and over the same point on the earth's surface. Regardless of the height or speed chosen, the manned space station has a multitude of uses. Operating in an almost complete vacuum with neither storm clouds nor atmospheric dance to dull the cosmic views, it makes a perfect astronomical observatory. Our solar system, the milky way and more distant galaxies, can be studied, photographed and spectroscoped with a clarity and accuracy impossible on earth. Capable of continuous, 24 hour operation and equipped with recently developed light amplifiers and masers, these orbiting observatories will permit an unparalleled leap forward in man's knowledge of the universe.

As specialized laboratories, the stations provide unique conditions for varied fields of research — physics, electronics, geophysical, weather prediction, communications and many others. Television engineers tell us that with three relay stations, properly placed, they can blanket the world with almost perfect TV transmission. The programs will originate on earth, be beamed to the station, amplified and rebroadcast back in wide, cone-like zones. Coming from above the atmosphere at a near vertical angle, they will penetrate the deepest valleys without hindrance. Present limitations due to hills, mountains and earth curvature, will cease to exist. Among other uses, civil, military or possibly as a U.N. policing device, space stations can serve as staging bases for further exploration of the cosmos. Specialized, electro-powered spaceships can be assembled beside them in orbit and launched for more efficient interplanetary travel.

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The space station will be serviced by "Ferry Ships", shuttling back and forth from earth bases. The examples shown in the illustration have atomic powerplants, using liquified hydrogen as an operating fluid. On a single loading of plutonium, these reactors can function continuously for several years. In operation, the heat generated by nuclear fission is conducted through a transfer agent to the rocket's "combustion chamber". Here, a stream of hydrogen gas is admitted, expanded to many times its normal volume and then permitted to escape through the nozzle. As in all rockets, the reaction force of this rearward gas jet, drives the vehicle forward. In passing through the chamber, the gas may become slightly radioactive, so to avoid contamination of base launching pads, the ferry is launched by a powerful, chemical-fuel booster. This is a recoverable vehicle, manned by a pilot and co-pilot, who fly it back to base after it has lifted the ferry to a safe operating altitude. The booster is powered by a girdle of standardized, solid-fuel rockets which can be grouped in various power combinations, tailored to the load lifted. Once beyond the contamination level, the ferry cuts loose, switches on its power and accelerates into the target station's orbit. Meanwhile, the booster glides back to base and uses its remaining fuel in a tail-down descent. It lands and takes off on tripod landing legs which fold into the three directional fins during flight. (Note trailing edges).

The ferry is designed in the form of a streamlined bar-bell, with a control and passenger compartment in the nose, and its atomic powerplant in the tail. Connecting these units is a long, slender tank in which the liquid hydrogen is stored. In assembling a station in space, the ferry is partly cannibalized. Prefabricated building sections are peeled off from around its center tank and fitted together to form the station's sides and decks. A variety of basic forms are used, all designed to nest one within the other and fit around the tank. In the picture, this operation is shown in the lower foreground, with the partially assembled station above it. In the upper left, an ascending ferry parts company with its booster and in the lower center, another, stripped of its load of building material, returns to earth. A completed station appears in the lower right, with a service ferry locked in the trumpet shaped loading dock beneath it.

LET'S step aboard one of these outward bound service-ferries and see what life in a space station is like. Perched

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atop its fat, rocket girdled booster, our two-stage transport looks enormous from the ground level. Squat, heavy legs support the lower component, lifting its circular array of nozzles clear of the concrete pad. Beside it, a tall gantry tower rises on its tracks in a maze of scarlet steelwork. A capsule like elevator whisks us to its top and moving gingerly across a windblown upper deck, we enter the ferry's access hatch. Inside, we find a compact, circular cabin, with a ring of acceleration couches radiating from its center. In company with the other passengers, a couple of blazé young physicists and a prim looking girl technician, we make ourselves comfortable. After a little wait, our pilots enter, check our couch belts and climb the ladder leading to the control compartment. With a buzz of electric motors, the hatch closes and locks and all eyes shift to the ceiling count-down indicator. After another pause, we hear the co-pilot's metallic warning: "Ten seconds to take-off". Alongside the indicator, a red light flashes off, a green one on and an illuminated number nine appears. We brace ourselves and follow the diminishing numerals as they flick across the dial.

The take-off is not as severe an ordeal as we had been led to expect. As the engine roars and the ship gathers way, our bodies are moulded to the couch padding by an increasing downward push. While the gathering pressure seems irresistible and holds us pinned like bugs on a board, it is never actually painful. It eases a moment as we attain maximum booster speed, then clamps down again as the stages part and the ferry's atomic motor cuts in. Again, the pressure eases, gradually dying away as our ship reaches terminal velocity and coasts smoothly in an upward arc. We can unfasten our belts, now and take a look out of the portholes.

The ferry's programming has been accurate and after a few minutes, we find ourselves swinging into orbit within easy sight of the target space station. For a short time, we zoom along in its wake, behind and slightly below our quarry. The spectacle holds us glued to the tinted glass. Below, the swell of the earth slips by in a hazy, cloud flecked curve. Above, a blaze of unfiltered sunlight glints on the giant wheel as it slowly revolves against a background of star spangled black velvet. The sight is one that we will never forget.

In the ferry cabin, we feel a slight nudge of movement, and then another, as the pilot gently gooses his auxiliary rockets. Slowly, we overtake the whirling station, climbing foot by foot into its shadow. Then a delicate

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touch of retro-rocket correlates our velocities and the two vehicles speed along their common orbital course in company. We are directly below the station, now and the final linking maneuver begins. Ever so slowly, our nose swings to the vertical until it is pointing up toward the trumpet-bell mouth of the landing dock. Inside the station, the Operations Officer throws a switch and a set of powerful electro-magnets are energized. Our ferry responds to their pull, its nose sliding smoothly upward into the bell. Higher it moves, accurately balanced and centered by magnetic force, until it is securely seated in the tubular dock. We are locked within the central spindle of the space station, the static axis about which the great wheel revolves. A moment later, the access hatch of our compartment swings open and we see the Operations Officer grinning in at us.

EXPLAINING that we are now in the motionless core of the station and therefore weightless, he guides us up through the hatchway. Eerily, we float out into the slowly turning hub chamber. Above us, an identical hatch leads to the upper spindle, with its astronomical labs and ball-mounted observatory. Around the cylindrical walls, four other hatchways give access to the quadrupal spokes of the wheel. Following his directions, we glide feet first into one of them and find ourselves in a tiny elevator. Its door automatically closes and with a woosh of compressed air, the little lift descends. However, it is like no elevator we have ever ridden in on earth. As we progress downward, the usual falling away sensation is reversed and the floor presses increasingly against our feet. By the time we reach the "bottom" of the shaft, the effects of weightlessness have disappeared and we again experience the familiar pull of gravity. When a side door opens and we step out, we could just as well be in an air-conditioned office building on earth.

We are out in the rotating rim of the huge wheel, the area in which the station's crew live and work. Corridors lead off to either side and a staircase ascends to the deck above. As we stroll down one of these brightly lit hallways, we notice that each sector of the rim can be shut off from the others by airtight doors, and forms a separate, pressure proof entity. This, our guide points out, permits the isolation of any section accidentally pierced by cosmic debris. Opening off either side of the corridor is a succession of labs, storage and workrooms, each equipped for a spe-

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cific purpose or specialized research function. Those on the upper side are designed to use the intense light and heat of direct sunlight, the lower tier, the zero cold of spatial shadow. In the arches beneath the floor, are air-conditioning ducts and plumbing, plus tanks for the storage of water, chemicals, and bulk supplies.

Ascending to the deck above, we find the station's public rooms—lounge, library, music, TV and movie rooms. A bright, well appointed dining room adjoins the lounge, with kitchen and service pantry beyond. This level also contains living quarters for the station personnel. To permit precious privacy, there is a stateroom for each member of the staff and crew. The cabins on the shady side of the station have doors opening on a protected promenade that circles the satellite's rim. Through its plastic enclosure, superb views of the solar system unfold, with the sunlit earth appearing to revolve slowly around the stroller in a continuously changing panorama of cloud and landscape.

Above, on the sunny side of the giant wheel rim, are the hydroponic gardens, brightly green beneath their canopy of heat controlling plastic. Donning dark glasses, we are permitted a peep at several of the compartments. Like the rest of the station, these are isolated from one another by pressure tight bulkheads. Each is completely self-contained and in case of damage by meteoric fragments, can be closed off and repaired without disturbing its neighbors. Carefully selected strains of algae are grown in nutrient solutions, circulating through a system of horizontal plastic tubes. These are the atmospheric heart of the station. Oxygen, given off by the plants as a regular process of growth, is gathered in the tops of the tubes and piped off for purification and recirculation. Carbon-dioxide, exhaled by the crew, is added to the nutrient solution and provides the plants with a necessity for growth. As the algae wax fat and mature, they sink to the bottom of the circulating solution and are drained off. This excess crop is then sun-dried and shipped back to earth as a by-product of the station's operation. Experiments have proven it to be equal to eggs and beefsteak in nutritive value.

Warned that the ferry ship is ready for the trip back to earth, we return to our cosmic taxi. We have had a glimpse of tomorrow —an inkling of what life will be like when man succeeds in completing his first real step into the illimitable universe that surrounds us. **THE END**

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Ensign De Ruyter: DREAMER

By ARTHUR PORGES

Herewith, another adventure of the rising star of the Galactic Navy, in which he dreams up a way to end a war. Hint: the clue to the solution is obvious to the alert reader almost from the very start.

HECTOR WINSLOW, the Licensed Trader on the planet *Faraday*, one of three that circled (or ellipsed, to be precise) 4 Ceti, was fat, but not jolly. Perhaps this was due to indigestion, since he loved—and gorged on—the local food, which was delicious to the taste and would have puzzled the stomach of a healthy buzzard. But whatever the reason, he was no comfort at all to Ensign De Ruyter, who was faced with a tough problem, and had nobody else to consult.

"You must have been born unlucky," Winslow told the boy sourly. "This is the first time in thirty years that the two nations are certain to fight. I've never seen one, myself, but those shovel-bladed spears and saw-toothed knives must be ugly in action." He took a huge mouthful of *bufar*, the local stew, a combination of ulab meat, herbs, and buds of the dilko plant. It smelled wonderfully appetitizing, but De Ruyter knew that even after eighteen years of trying, Winslow's stomach still couldn't quite handle the concoction. So it was not for him, only as many hours on *Faraday*, to risk it.

"It's certainly bad luck that I was dumped here for a week while Captain Morse and the lieutenant go sky-hooting around the galaxy," De Ruyter groaned. "What can I do to stop a war single-handed? All I have is a Markov Pistol and a week's supply of food."

"There isn't a thing you or

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anybody can do," was the reply. "When the Head Priest says the god wants a war, they go to it. Not often, I must say, but wholeheartedly. They'll dance around Iron Mike—that's the god, but not their name for him; mine—waving a variety of edged weapons in his black, impassive puss, then send a special arrow to Nabaland. That's a declaration of war—no sneaky stuff here. The Nabanese will accept the invitation, naturally, and all the males in both countries—about sixteen thousand, all told, will fight it out with cold steel." He spat. "It's going to be a bloody mess. No cowards in these nations. About a thousand or so will survive. Maybe," he added wryly, "that's why they don't fight oftener."

"I've got to stop it," the ensign said. "It would be criminal to let fifteen thousand people butcher each other."

"They're savages, basically," Winslow said. "Even their god was made by an earlier civilization; they could never cast anything that big. Spear-blades and knives are all they can manage. Stuff hammered out over coals."

"When will the war start?"

"Depends on the preliminary dance, I think. That's supposed to be tomorrow afternoon."

"What about you?" De Ruyter asked curiously. "Are you safe?"

"Absolutely; they don't kill outsiders. Besides, I'm too useful to them. But maybe," he added, in a thoughtful voice, "some wild-eyed buck full of battle-madness will take after you. So I'd better share my little secret—one I've kept in mind for a possible pinch."

"What's that?"

"This god of theirs—Iron Mike—seems to stand on a metal platform. But I discovered a hidden tunnel to a room underneath; probably the original builders used it to sucker the simple-minded worshippers, but how I don't know. No gadgets down there that I can find. But anyhow, it's a safe hide-out, and and you might as well hole up there until the war's over."

"You know I can't do that," the ensign replied, unhappily. "It's my duty to stop them."

"You can try," Winslow said, looking his disgust at such quixotry. "If you damned bureaucrats would let us bring in power, even electric or steam, to raise the level, you wouldn't have these primitive wars." He was voicing a common traders' grievance. There wasn't much profit in material on a cultural par with each planet's own, but that was the only sort permitted. The Galactic Parliament didn't want any forced civilization with savages getting nuclear weapons.

"I'll talk to the Chief," De

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Ruyter said. "Any chance," he asked wistfully, "of scaring hell out of them with my Markov?" He patted the heavy hand-gun at his waist.

"You could more easily scare a giant weasel or a grizzcat from *Hooke*. These people don't scare. If you shot all but one, in an orderly sequence, he'd come at you with a knife or spear. Me, I'd rather get a bolt of high voltage from the Markov any time. That's why I'd up their technology. But the bony fingers are still on the bridle of progress," he added, in a mournful tone. He had, De Ruyter was already aware, a taste for a juicy metaphor.

"If I can't bully, I'll have to persuade. If I could postpone the war for a week, my ship would be back, and maybe the three of us, with all her power and equipment, could figure out a way to stop it permanently."

"And if sofors had wings, they'd poison the air for miles," Winslow said. The thought of these super-skunks from *Tartaglia* made De Ruyter wince. And with wings, too!

"You mean they never postpone?"

"After waiting thirty years to build up? And dying to let off steam? Give it up, kid. If you were a full admiral, with gold braid to your ankles, they still wouldn't listen."

BUT De Ruyter didn't quit easily. Hundreds of years earlier, his ancestor of the same name had taken on the heavyweight champions of the ocean-sea, and whipped them. Of course, the Dutch were not able to make much use of the victory, and got their comeuppance later, but in the circumstances they had reason to be proud. Some of the old admiral's genes were in this descendant, and working hard. A blood-line capable of trouncing the British at sea ought to be able to manage spear-wielding savages.

But when the ensign talked to the Chief, a huge, barrel-chested man, lemon yellow as to skin, he was quickly disillusioned. Chief Haramaruta was perfectly courteous, with the simple dignity of a St. Bernard confronting a yapping Mexican Hairless, but quite unmoved by De Ruyter's pleas.

"When Lattanugu says 'war,' we must fight." He lifted an iron club high into the air. It was the size of a normal man's thigh, and must have weighed over a hundred pounds on this earthlike planet. The great muscles of the chief's forearm, knotting into thick bulges, showed no signs of strain, however. In fact, he waved the weapon around like a conductor's baton. De Ruyter could almost hear martial music.

The ensign was anxious for a glimpse of the belligerent deity,

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and Haramaruta was glad to oblige. He led the boy to the edge of the village, and proudly indicated the idol. It was an iron statue, only a little bigger than the chief himself. It had a grimly ferocious face, and its great taloned paws were stretched out as if to rend any handy worshipper.

"How do you know the god wants war?" De Ruyter asked.

"The priest says so, and he knows," was the complacent reply.

"Oh, brother!" the ensign muttered. "And I was left here just to make a few notes on local customs. A peaceful bunch, they said; last war many years ago. Perfect timing!" He spoke in his own language, instead of the local dialect used with the chief. It sounded, the boy thought, like a silidor eating peanut brittle under water, but had been easily learned from modern brain-wave educators.

"Is there any way the god might show he changed his mind?" De Ruyter persisted.

"There is none. And Lattanugu is not a woman, to vary."

Even here, the ensign reflected, you find the old sex-bias. Only women changed their minds. Well, that was proof of how human these big, lemon-hued primitives were, after all. It re-emphasized the fact that he could not let them massacre each other.

Disheartened, he again sought out Winslow.

"Any luck?" the trader asked dryly. "They agree to call it off as a favor to you?"

"No," De Ruyter said, his voice hard. "Don't you even care if these people slaughter each other wholesale?"

"I care a lot," was the surprising answer. "But you can't fight that Big City Hall in the Sky, son. I know these characters, and they're spoiling for a fight. Maybe if Lattanugu Iron Mike jumped onto the dance and took away their weapons, they'd cool off. But they're not going to pass up blood for homilies; that I can tell you. So let me show you the mouth of the tunnel, just in case. If this nation gets clobbered, and the Nebanese head this way, I'd advise you to take cover. It won't be for long. Once the fighting's over, they wouldn't hurt a fly. And they never hurt women and children, which shows," he said with heavy irony, "just how damned uncivilized they really are."

"Why," De Ruyter said, giving him a long, wide-eyed stare, "you love these people. That's why you stayed here all these years."

"I'm making money," the trader said, looking him in the eye.

"Sure," the ensign said, his lips twitching. "Let's see that hide-out—just in case."

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THE tunnel mouth was well concealed behind a screen of thorn-bushes.

"I discovered it by accident," Winslow said. "Believe me, only the hot breath of an angry raskadik on the back of my neck could have made me plough into these. Tore myself to rags, but found the opening. You wouldn't know it—yet," he added, "but a raskadik looks like a big wildcat, has quills, and makes a furious hornet seem like friendly puppy. Luckily, they have very tender noses—and big—and hate to get thorns in 'em. Mine isn't small," he pointed out, patting it ruefully, "and it's tender, too; but I had no choice."

"No gun?"

"Well," Winslow said, looking a little sheepish, "raskadiks aren't common near a village, and I don't like the fool thing banging my hip raw."

Once in the tunnel, after a gingerly piercing of the thorny cover, the trader used a flashlight to show the way. At the end was a cubical room, quite bare, made of stone. An iron pillar extended from the roof to the floor. It was a cylinder about a foot in diameter.

"They don't know it," Winslow said, "but the Iron Mike has quite a tail. You know," he said, "I've been tempted to have a dream—they take 'em seriously here—about this place, and let them find it. It would give a lot of prestige; help in trading. But I guess it's too nice a secret, and might be too handy in a pinch, to give away."

"Say," De Ruyter suggested. "Why couldn't I dream the god wants peace?"

"You could; and they'd listen; but unless there was proof, it wouldn't work. And I don't mean sleight-of-hand or any such monkey tricks. They're savages, but not fools, and their priests can do parlor tricks like you never saw. Forget it, De Ruyter. You'll have to sweat it out—like me. I expect to go off a few miles and fish. It bothers me to have several thousand friends metagrobalized into hamburger." His words came lightly, but his face was dark. De Ruyter followed him out of the room in silence.

THAT night De Ruyter sat up very late in his little metaloid pup-tent, flogging a weary brain for some answers. It was beginning to look as if the war would go on. Tomorrow afternoon the big ritual dance was scheduled. Winslow had filled him in on the details. The climax came when the chief and all his lieutenants, one after another, presented their favorite weapons to the god to be sanctified for the killing of their mutual enemies. After that, the legions set out to a traditional battleground, whence a chal-

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lenge would go to Nabaland. Within forty-eight hours, the foe would respond, moving in force to the area of battle. Then, slaughter. The ensign groaned. If only the lieutenant had been left here instead of himself! A lousy break. Even if it wasn't his fault, the brass would always wonder why he couldn't have done more. It was a long and sleepless night . . .

But with the morning light there was a dawn in De Ruyter's mind as well. If only there was time, too, and the means. Not to mention a bit of luck.

He disappeared early, but nobody missed him. Winslow had already left, to cast for the uneatable blobs that passed for fish on *Faraday*. And the people were busy preparing for the ritual dance.

But when the ceremony approached its climax, De Ruyter appeared, pouch-eyed and drooping, to address the chief and his lieutenants.

"I had a dream," he announced boldly. "One that all should hear."

The chief's iron face softened briefly.

"Speak," he said; then added, "But not too long; there is much to do."

"There may be little to do," the boy said meaningly. "I dreamed that the great god himself, Lattanugu, wants no war, but peace for another thirty years."

The huge savage looked down at De Ruyter sceptically. "So? What sign will Lattanugu give us," he asked, with marked sarcasm. "Beware of blasphemy," he warned. "We allow much to outlanders, but Lattanugu is a fierce and jealous god."

"In my dream," De Ruyter continued hardily, ignoring the threat, "the god took your weapons from you. Perhaps that will be his sign. Would you then believe me?"

There was a swelling murmur from the leaders.

"Even the priests would believe that," the chief said. "And they are harder to convince than I. But of course no such thing will happen. It was a false dream —if it was a dream," he added meaningly.

But when the dance continued, the ensign was not around to see anything; but again, few missed him. Instead, every eye watched the chief cavort nearer and nearer to the grim god, finally thrusting at the iron breast with a shovel-bladed spear. There was a mutter of astonishment then, because as the sharp point brushed the taloned paws, they seemed to seize it, holding the blade fast. The giant savage attempted to free his weapon, but not even his mighty strength was enough. Paling under his yellow skin, he

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backed off, too brave for fear, but not bold enough to battle the god further.

One by one his lieutenants advanced, only to meet with the same treatment. Axes, knives, clubs—Lattanugu snatched and held them all the moment they came within an inch or two of his paws. It was convincing proof of the god's change of heart.

The Head Priest, wild-eyed and with a quaver in his voice, broke the arrow of challenge in full view of all.

"There will be no war!" he announced. "The legions will return to their villages at once." He was obeyed without a single objection.

LATER, aboard their scoutship, HERSCHEL, Captain Morse and Lieutenant Burton, studied De Ruyter with something approaching awe. If this wasn't a future Galactic Admiral, their predictors were out of order.

"Let me get this straight," the captain said. "You unwound about ten miles of silver wire from the Markov."

"Well, it seemed like that much," the boy said. "And I needed it all. The more turns, you know, the higher gauss rating."

"That I know."

"Then I wound that pillar in the room; it took hours. Finally I bled the whole potential of the power-cell into the solenoid. I figure," he said proudly, "that my quickie giant magnet had a gauss rating of around 90,000—that's enough almost to pull the iron out of their blood! Naturally, when they poked their knives and spears near the idol—and into the edge of my field—I had them cold: the god was backing my dream to the hilt. Of course, one Markov cell couldn't maintain that kind of a flux very long, but I didn't need much time. It was all over in about fifteen minutes."

"Well, our boy's done it again," Burton said. "We'd better practice saluting him, Captain, because the way he's going, he'll be an admiral before I make commander. I've heard of the Nelson Touch, but this must be De Ruyter's Razzle-Dazzle."

"Yeah," Morse said. "A future admiral."

"Thanks to his magnetic personality," the skipper said.

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A MATTER OF MAGNITUDE

By AL SEVCIK

When you're commanding a spaceship over a mile long, and armed to the teeth, you don't exactly expect to be told to get the hell out . . .

THE ship, for reasons that had to do with the politics of appropriations, was named Senator Joseph L. Holloway, but the press and the public called her Big Joe. Her captain, six-star Admiral Heselton, thought of her as Great Big Joe, and never fully got over being awestruck at the size of his command.

"She's a mighty big ship, Rogers," he said proudly to the navigator, ignoring the latter's rather vacant stare and fixed smile. "More than a mile long, and wider than hell." He waved his hands expansively. "She's never touched down on Earth, you know. Never will. Too big for that. They built her on the moon. The cost? Well . . ."

Swiveling his chair around, Heselton slowly surveyed the ship's control room with a small, satisfied smile. The two pilots sitting far forward, almost hidden by their banks of instruments, the radar operators idly watching their scopes, the three flight engineers sitting intently at their enormous control consoles, and, just behind, the radio shack—its closed door undoubtedly hiding a game of cards. For weeks now, as Big Joe moved across the galaxy's uncharted fringe, the radio bands had been completely dead, except, of course, for the usual star static hissing and burbling in the background.

Turning back again to his navigator, Heselton smiled modestly and noted that Big Joe was undisputedly the largest, most powerful, most feared, and most effective spaceship in the known universe.

As always, Rogers nodded agreement. The fact that he'd

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heard it a hundred times didn't make it any less true. Big Joe, armed with every weapon known to Terran technology, was literally the battleship to end all battleships. Ending battleships—and battles—was, in fact, her job. And she did it well. For the first time, the galaxy was at peace.

With a relaxed sigh, Heselton leaned back to gaze at the stars and contemplate the vastness of the universe, compared to which even Big Joe was an insignificant dot.

"Well," said Rogers, "time for another course check. I'll . . ." He jumped back, barely avoiding the worried lieutenant who exploded upon them from the radio shack.

"A signal, sir! Damn close, on the VHF band, their transmission is completely overriding the background noise." He waved excitedly to someone in the radio shack and an overhead speaker came to life emitting a distinct clacking-grunting sound. "It's audio of some sort, sir, but there's lots more to the signal than that."

In one motion Heselton's chair snapped forward, his right fist hit the red emergency alert button on his desk, and his left snapped on the ship's intercom. Lights dimmed momentarily as powerful emergency drive units snapped into action, and the ship echoed with the sound of two thousand men running to battle stations.

"Bridge to radar! Report."

"Radar to bridge. All clear."

Heselton stared incredulously at the intercom. "What?"

"Radar to bridge, repeating. All clear. Admiral, we've got two men on every scope, there's nothing anywhere."

A new voice cut in on the speaker. "Radio track to bridge."

Frowning, Heselton answered. "Bridge. Come in radio track. We're listening."

"Sir," the crisp voice of the radio track section's commander had an excited tinge. "Sir, doppler calculations show that the source of those signals is slowing down somewhere to our right. It's acting like a spaceship, sir, that's coming to a halt."

The admiral locked eyes with Rogers for a second, then shrugged. "Slow the ship, and circle right. Radio track, can you keep me posted on the object's position?"

"No can do, sir. Doppler effect can't be used on a slow moving source. It's still off to our right, but that's the best I can say."

"Sir," another voice chimed in, "this is fire control. We've got our directional antennas on the thing. It's either directly right or directly left of the ship, matching speed with us exactly."

"*Either* to our right or left?"

"That's the best we can do, sir, without radar help."

"Admiral, sir," the lieutenant who had first reported the signal came running back. "Judging from the frequency and strength,

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we think it's probably less than a hundred miles away."

"*Less* than a hundr . . ."

"Of course, we can't be positive, sir."

Heselton whirled back to the intercom. "Radar! That thing is practically on our necks. What the hell's the matter with that equipment . . .?"

The radar commander's voice showed distinct signs of strain. "Can't help it, Admiral. The equipment is working perfectly. We've tried the complete range of frequencies, twenty-five different sets are in operation, we're going blind looking. There is absolutely nothing, nothing at all."

For a moment the bridge was silent, except for the clacking-grunting from the overhead speaker which, if anything, sounded louder than before.

"It's tv, sir!" The radio lieutenant came running in again. "We've unscrambled the image. Here!" The communications screen on Heselton's desk glowed for a moment, then flashed into life.

The figure was clearly alien, though startlingly humanoid—at least from the waist up, which was all that showed in the screen. A large mouth and slightly bulging eyes gave it a somewhat jovial, frog-like demeanor. Seated at a desk similar to Heselton's, wearing a gaudy uniform profusely strewn with a variety of insignia, it was obviously Heselton's counterpart, the commander of an alien vessel.

"Hmmm, looks like we've contacted a new race. Let's return the call, Lieutenant." A tiny red light glowed beneath a miniature camera on Heselton's desk and almost at once the alien's face registered obvious satisfaction. It waved a six-fingered hand in an unorthodox, but friendly, greeting.

Heselton waved back.

The alien then pointed to his mouth, made several clacking-grunting sounds, and moved a hand on his desk. The scene switched to another alien standing in front of what looked like a blackboard, with a piece of chalk in his hand. The meaning was clear.

"Lieutenant, have this transmission switched to the linguistics section. Maybe those guys can work some sort of language." The screen blanked out. Heselton leaned back, tense, obviously worried. Hesitantly, he reached out and touched a button on the intercom.

"Astronomy."

"Professor, there's a ship right next door somewhere that should stand out like King Kong in a kindergarten."

"I know, Admiral. I've been listening to the intercom. Our optical equipment isn't designed for close range work, but we've been doing the best we can, tried everything from infra-red through ultra-violet. If there is a ship out there I'm afraid it's invisible."

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Beads of sweat sprinkled Heselton's forehead. "This is bad, Rogers. Mighty bad." Nervously, he walked across to the right of the bridge and stood, hands clasped behind his back, staring blankly out at blackness and the scattered stars. "I know there is a ship out there, and I know that a ship simply can't be invisible, not to radar *and* optics."

"What makes you sure there is only one, sir?"

Heselton cracked his fists together. "My God, Rogers, you're right! There might be . . ."

The intercom clacked. "This is fire control again, sir. I think we've got something on the radiation detectors."

"Good work, what did you find?"

"Slight radioactivity, typical of interstellar drive mechanisms, somewhere off to our right. Can't tell exactly where, though."

"How far away is it?"

"I don't know, sir."

Heselton's hands dropped to his sides. "Thanks," he said, "for the help."

His desk tv flashed into life with a picture of the smiling alien commander. "This is the linguistics section, Admiral. The aliens understand a fairly common galactic symbology, I believe we can translate simple messages for you now."

"Ask him where the hell he is," Heselton snapped without thinking, then instantly regretted it as the alien's face showed unmistakable surprise.

The alien's smile grew into an almost unbelievable grin. He turned sideways to speak to someone out of sight of the camera and suddenly burst into a series of roaring cackles. "He's laughing, sir." The translator commented unnecessarily.

The joke was strictly with the aliens. Heselton's face whitened in quick realization. "Rogers! They *didn't know* that we can't see them!"

"Look, sir." The navigator pointed to the tv screen and a brilliantly clear image of Big Joe shimmering against the galaxy, lit by millions of stars. Every missile port, even the military numerals along her nose were clearly visible.

"They're rubbing it in, Rogers. Showing us what we look like to them." Heselton's face was chalk. "They could blast Big Joe apart, piece by piece—the most powerful ship in the galaxy."

"Maybe," said Rogers, "the second most powerful."

Without answering, Heselton turned and looked out again at empty space and millions of steady, unwinking stars. His mind formed an image of a huge, ethereal spaceship, missile ports open, weapons aimed directly at Big Joe.

The speaker interrupted his nightmare. "This is fire control, Admiral. With your permission I'll scatter a few C-bombs . . ."

Heselton leaped for the microphone. "Are you out of your mind? We haven't the slightest

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idea of the forces that guy has. We might be in the center of a whole blooming fleet. Ever think of that?"

The alien's face, still smirking, appeared again on the screen. "He says," said the interpreter, "that he finds the presence of our armed ship very annoying."

Heselton knew what he had to do. "Tell him," he said, swallowing hard, "that we apologize. This part of the galaxy is strange to us."

"He says he is contemplating blasting us out of the sky."

Heselton said nothing, but he longed to reach out and throttle the grinning, alien face.

"However," the interpreter continued, "he will let us go safely if we leave immediately. He says to send an unarmed, diplomatic vessel next time and maybe his people will talk to us."

"Thank him for his kindness." Heselton's jaws clenched so tightly they ached.

"He says," said the interpreter, "to get the hell out."

The grinning face snapped off the screen, but the cackling laughter continued to reverberate in the control room until the radio shack finally turned off the receiver.

"Reverse course," the admiral ordered quietly. "Maximum drive."

A thousand missile launchers, designed to disintegrate solar systems, were deactivated, hundreds of gyros swung the mile-long ship end for end and stabilized her on a reverse course, drive units big enough to power several major cities whined into operation, anti-grav generators with the strength to shift small planets counterbalanced the external acceleration, and the ship moved, away, with a speed approaching that of light.

"Well," muttered Heselton, "that's the very first time Big Joe has ever had to retreat." As if it were his own personal failure, he walked slowly across the control room and down the corridor towards his cabin.

"Admiral!" Lost in thought, Heselton barely heard the call.

"Admiral, look!" Pausing at the door to his cabin, Heselton turned to face the ship's chief astronomer running up waving two large photographs.

"Look, sir," the professor gasped for breath. "We thought this was a spot on the negative, but one of the men got curious and enlarged it about a hundred times." He held up one of the photos. It showed a small, fuzzy, but unmistakable spaceship. "No wonder we couldn't spot it with our instruments."

Heselton snatched it out of his hand. "I see what you mean. This ship must have been thousands of miles . . ."

The professor shook his head. "No, sir. As a matter of fact, it was quite close by."

"But . . ."

"We figure that the total length of the alien ship was roughly an inch and a half."

THE END

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Even the good wars of Moderan can pall on the new-metal man in his Stronghold. One begins to think, can there be a purpose in life? One begins to make . . . .

The FINAL DECISION

By DAVID R. BUNCH

STEEL you can be rid of. Easily. You just lay it by. Metal is a fine thing to leave stacked in corners or along ditches of roads. Or melt it down. When you're THROUGH. Our new-metal alloy "replacements"—what a fine deal . . . to live forever, ho!!!

To live forever; to be our true bad selves. How fine it sounded. What a grand plan! But have you ever lain back at the switch panel in your War Room with your fort on the status of Continuous Blast for weeks on end? *Karoom karoom karoom.* How it palls. How it tires. How you begin to ask yourself, this is for what? what purpose, hey? But you pause once—you rest just a little before the general amnesty goes out with the white flags up and you're dead, your walls flattened, your Stronghold crushed to dust. So what's to do? Year after year you lie back in your Stronghold and ride with the general plan. They want war, you war. They decide to peace it awhile, you send up your white flag along with the jolly rest.

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And you smile your teeth at the seasons and let time roll. After all, you have a lot of it—time. In Moderan.

One morning, say—it's a June Wednesday—the vapor shield is blue in memory of those old blue skies, the rockets are firing *arroump arroump arroump*, the walking doll bombs are rolling out toward all the Enemies and the Honest Jakes are homing down just fine to the kill—in fact, it's a perfect war. Then what? Suddenly your heart kicks up in its settings and you feel like doing some poems or sorrowing up on ode or two. Or you want to go love your neighbor and tell him how wrong is the war. Can you do it in this society? In Moderan! You dare! And anyway, what is TRUTH—the poems or the war? telling your neighbor it's wrong, or smiling your teeth bare while his poor green blood spots the plastic?

But before I tell you what I've decided to do concerning this TRUTH-PURPOSE Big Question, let me say I've tasted the sweets. I've been the top war man for many a vapor shield. (A vapor shield is a month, in Moderan, in case you hadn't heard). I've had them all at bay, my rockets beautifully firing for many a Moderan year. I've done the civic thing too. I've helped the poor struggling Stronghold against the bully one. I've ganged up on the arrogant to blast them down for trees. (A fine metal park now "grows" and glows with shining shrubs where many a bully Stronghold once stood and defied our happy laws). I've trained ever so many boys, refugees from Old Life in Far Wide, made them lean clean citizens for the Program, cleared them of Conscience Clutter and Moral Know, got them ready for Joys. I've sung the hymns on Gads Sonsday, done my prayers to the Needle Building, the Court men, the Hall men, the God-pieces far and wide. And each and every penance day has found me with my little plastic bag of penance tears slung down from a new-metal hand, my latest war medal around my neck, marching with my battle opposites—*plop plip plap* over the homeless plastic—going to the ceremonies, doing penance because as a man I had not, as indeed no man has, been perfect. Yes, I had won all my wars, but—well, who ever wins them as well as he might have won—who ever had as many as he might have had with a little more hard trying?

And now let me try a confession. (I'm not ashamed. I've sought Truth). Let me confess that along with all these high accomplishments of war I've also been a lover. Ah yes, I know it's

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unusual. I know I shake you, somewhat. But I reach for Truth —all Truth. I, the greatest of all the Stronghold masters, with my war medals stacked case on case —here on the brink of an Ultimate Decision I confess that I have known, have felt, have been among that unreasonable, unreliable word "love." I am guilty, but I am not sorry; I am not ashamed. Here in this steel-ribbed land, this plastic-coated iron and concrete new-metal place, where we practise strength and speculate on armor, dedicated to the high principle that only hate is reliable and finally true, I was a lover! I seem to brag. Perhaps I *do* brag.

It started out as Joys. Joys let me say, are fine in Moderan. Joys are what we live for, Joys and wars, and wars are, in a way, of course the ultimate Joys. But when a Joy turns into love, you're on dangerous ground. No longer thinking clean, you may be cluttered. You do not have, perhaps, that sharp precise decision about you that you had when you were clear and knew that hate was the only reliable emotion. Perhaps, in the final thinking, my greatness was truly my temporary downfall.

It began at the great awards festival that year in Warwington, the first year I won the double honors, the one of the crossed missiles and the award of the eleven steel walls. The award of the crossed missiles was given me because I was the top blaster in Moderan that year, having leveled more recalcitrant Strongholds as cleared places for trees, having fired more nuisance missiles without knockout harm to the Strongholds that lived clear-and-true by the rules of honorable war. The award of the eleven walls was pinned because my inventiveness had come up with a plan that had allowed my servants to be meaner to each other, that is, they had piled up more hate points per capita than had the servants of any other master. —Well there I was, supreme abroad and supreme at home, the acknowledged mean-master of all the lands of Moderan. It was a heady eminence; it was a feat to bloat the ribs and make one stand up taller.

So I went to get my awards that day in Warwington. At the glittering Banquet of Honor I inched out bold when my name was called; *plop plip plap* I wavered toward the dais, slow slow as we go working our hinges and braces. But no one laughed, for they were steel men too. What a price we have paid for our iron durability; what a bounty went to some cruel god of reality when we took the path of "replacements," accepted the new-metal parts and played our

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flesh-strips down. How I longed that shining day for one stretch of good striding, one minute with firm young flesh on my steel-rod legs and real feet in my high-polish war boots to reach me forward in a jaunty step.

Amid the heartbreak waiting of the jealous Stronghold masters at last I attained the dais. I stood there waving my joints in a little matter of mockery, lined my leg "replacements" up to stand me to tallest tall, pulled full my new-metal lungs and stared down into the honorable hating faces. Then the applause broke out, salvo on salvo of honor done by steel hands beating steel hands. Outside in the parks the honor missiles fired. Yes, as I said earlier, I have tasted the sweets.

On the dais that day occurred the unusual thing for me the double-honors winner. And it was ultimately my temporary downfall. While I stood chest-proud and tall-up for the pinning on of the honors, someone flicked on the ladies. What I mean to say is, while the ceremonial master was fastening my medals to me, a servant type rose up, a stage hand kind of person, and went all around on the dais and flicked to ON the life-switches of all the new-metal ladies that decorated our ceremonial area. Ordinarily it would have meant nothing, for our urges along those lines are not usually more than a light lukewarm in Moderan, and we have other things to do of a more consecrated nature. A lady for variety in Joys maybe once or twice a year, but other than that—phoo! But tonight I turned—and of such small things are our lives twisted and warped and arrested, and made full. My medals gleaming in gold, I caught the eye of a charmer. I was stunned to blue-gold and heaven-madness of dreaming, my heart pistoning hard while I stared. Later on in the show, when in eulogy they were giving me Everything—the world for my greatness, all the verbal blah about how a people should be proud, how much truly they owed for my double-win example—I said, trying hard for calm, going big for the cool nonchalance while my heart hammered—pointing, "Throw in the little blue-eyed goldy-blonde one. I've a spot for her in my statuary." So they loaded my wagons with ladies when I readied for my home. All of them I quickly melted down, except the ONE!

But the ONE! Here on the brink of the Final Deciding, after all the eras, after all the monotonous years of tasting the sweets of honor, how I see her, thinking back. Small and gold and blue—how they molded her! how her hinges were set in

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smooth! So I had taken her home and had looked at her long and well once and had set her among my statuary and had forgot her —all would have still been safe. Or I could have admired the mechanics at great length, or a little while, rubbed the rivets and weld joints well and then melted her down with my torches. What's to harm? —But no, I couldn't do the prudent thing. Not me!

But I was young then, for Moderan. Perhaps I was feeling a little ego-bloated that night after the gaudy event in Warwington, winning the double honors. Perhaps they had spiked the punch-introven that they served at the Table of Heroes, and not being used to it could be it lingered long in my flesh-strips. Or maybe it was just that time for something long dead in my heart-box to shudder again to life and confound me. At any rate, I did not take her home, look at her long and well once and then set her among my statuary, the ball men, the string-metal maidens and the other monstrosities of art that delight me. I did not feel her rivets and weld joints well and then melt her down to a lump, either! Ah no, not old double-awards winner mush-head me. I flipped her life-switch to ON! And there stood the goldy-blonde maiden, my darling, my sweetheart—ONE! I knew all at once, somehow that things would never be the same, not quite, for me.

But I will not bore you with the full-rose song of our love. How it would delight me to tell! How it, perhaps, would pall on you to read, for there are not words for its justice, and where there words—well, who is a master chooser? Let the measure of the event be read by you, between the lines, as it were, of what happened to my fort.

Stronghold 10, my fort, was expected, after the big deal of the double-awards win, to blossom and bloom into the terror of all Moderan. No one would believe otherwise. After all, I was young then (for Moderan) and a world of war and hate seemed full of promise for a young man and his fort. Ultimately we fulfilled all the hopes of our well-wishers, but that was—well, ultimately. Right after the Warwington ceremonies, when I went home with my wagons full of ladies and melted them all down but the ONE! Stronghold 10 passed into almost total eclipse. Disgraceful? Sure! My missiles moulded in their launchers, the walking doll bombs did not walk, the cold winds whirled through the holes the enemy warheads made in my ramparts. But it was warm, warm! in one inmost room of my

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Stronghold where I dallied. The head weapons man would beat a tattoo on my door day and night to report the battle damage, to tell of our walls being honeycombed. "In hell's name, sir, shall we fire?" he'd shriek. "Fire? Fire!? What fire?" I'd mumble, warm and dazed with love, and then it'd be back to the lips of my new-metal mistress to work the lever bed in our great ecstasy and leave the head weapons man wringing hands and wailing because I would not give the order to fire. How could I? I, give the order to fire in war! I had the great blaze of my own right there in bed, the big bonflame of love.

But ultimately, of course, I came to my senses. Everything palls in awhile, even the Joys of a new-metal mistress, and you find you want something else, even if she is your ONE-darling, your sweet-honeydoll, the one great bang-boom of your heart. I wanted honors. The way to get honors in Moderan was to let the doll bombs roll, let the Honest Jakes scream out, let the high-up weird shrieking Wreck-Wrecks home to targets far and wide. The morning I finally turned her life-switch to OFF I was a madman; I was everywhere at once, ordering here a wall shored up, here a missile fired and here a doll bomb armed with a greater blaster head. I covered miles that day in the Stronghold, in my little runabout scoot, and the world shuddered with war. Yes, Stronghold 10 was again in the lists, battle-joined. Just say I made up enough hate ground that year to offset the laggard months and again won on points the award of the crossed missiles and stood down in Warwington for the tinseled Banquet of Heroes. The award of the eleven steel walls, given for internal meanness, eluded me that year, and would until the departure of the ONE. But later we got that fixed up too.

And now perhaps you'll wonder why I stand here on the brink of a Final Decision, as I mentioned earlier, and why I make this Decision, I the greatest, most honored man in all Moderan. Not to be long-winded, just say I'm quitting here to search a larger field. Temporarily, I hope, but it could very well be permanent. Why? Perchance —nay, not perchance—most surely I do not know why, clearly, I go. And surely the conjecturing should rest right here. But something nags me, nay, compels me, as it has man for long, to talk much about that I know of least. It is an urge not to be denied, a thing of must-do, surely.

Not to confuse you at the outset, when I speak of quitting, I

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mean QUITTING. I mean DYING!—Oh, didn't it seem fine when first we discovered the trick of "replacements" and knew, with new-metal alloy the bulk of our bodily splendor and our flesh-strips few and played down, we could live, could be, endlessly? How the world in our dreams opened up like a sweet-trance song going forever. What a chance to win honors. How much time for the blasting, and time to improve the techniques of blasting. Well, I think we came through on that point. We have improved the techniques of blasting. And honors—many honors were won. But though we talk on and nibble in for a million words, how blast to the heart of the problem? What's to say? I could say I'm tired. I'm not tired, not physically. New-metal alloy doesn't tire. I could say I'm full up with honors, quite bloated with achievement and have no more worlds to conquer. That's nearer the truth, but that's not quite it—not the last part, at any rate. There is a world left to conquer, or be conquered by, or slip into quietly like a new-metal mouse holing behind a wall. There is a world—

And now I'm faced with it, by my own Decision. I may as well tell you. The greatest in Moderan to be the first to crack in Moderan? Irony! Irony! Irony! But the years have piled up on my flesh-strips, the honors have come, have come, the blasting has gone on and goes on year after year, the truth of hate in our land goes beautifully, and yet the final thing comes no closer to a settlement. Purpose? PURPOSE! That I would know. Must know.

By my own hand—and this is MY Decision—I shall disassemble myself. I have one trusted servant. None of you know him. I keep him in a box in a most secret far place. At my signal he will come, at night from that far place through a secret tunnel, along an ancient and forgotten tube, up through a lid in the floor. He will help me with the last rivets. Perhaps we'll jest a bit—who knows? while we're taking my body down. Perhaps a last toast taken in introven. And then we'll—oh Lord, only he will!—the thought disturbs me though I try to mash it down—only he will stack my body along a wall! All except the flesh-strips. Those he will take with him quietly that night, stored in preservative, back through the secret floor hole and along the dim tunnel miles to store "me" (my flesh) with him in the box, all according to my prearrangement of commands on a tape I have prepared. And I will go—who, what knows HOW I will go? somehow at the separation of the last

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flesh-strips, the last nerve strand and the last rivet. Who, what knows WHERE I will go?

But I must go. To find out PURPOSE. The years have brought me finally to that decision. My Stronghold I will put on dormant for the planned duration of my departure. I have let my truce credits accumulate until I have, in funds, many white flags. As the top blaster in Moderan, far ahead on war, I have no battle committments that are crucial.

Will I come back? I plan to. I plan to come back and tell all of you of my travels. If I do not come back? If I am trapped out there, held in some stillborn quietness, some hanging immensity of void, incomprehensible, space-locked stillness of stillness, oh God? Well, that has been arranged for, for indeed it is a possibility. After a certain time, all commanded in the tape of my prearrangements, the little servant man will return from the secret box in the far place. I expect to be back then waiting to help him put me, my body, back together. But if I am not back then, I will not be back, then. (Oh, let us pun a little here even on the brink of Death). My flesh-strips will go to my head weapons man then, in a different arrangement, of course, for he cannot, must not, be me, and Stronghold 10 will go on, almost as before, into a new era of blasting.

So you see this Final Decision is indeed a final decision. But if the risks are high, the stakes are indeed of the highest. I take this course freely here on the eminence of my heaped honors. I have sought TRUTH and found it existed for me not only in the fine clean hates of the Moderan Strongholds but also in the fine hot love of a new-metal mistress long ago, when I was very young. I now seek a higher thing—PURPOSE. Since I have not found out PURPOSE completely in the blasting, the Joys, the loves, the hates, the life of Moderan, I'll seek it across the line. May fortune smile on my venture. Oh yes, for us all!

THE END

(Continued from page 103

of the Charlies? Some might perish in whirlpools of strange force, in unthinkable cosmic dangers. Others might ironically become the idols or gods of savage, ignorant minds. It could be that in time some would drift to other galaxies. But sometimes, somewhere, one at least might deliver his message to those who could decipher it. The music of Schubert might be heard by alien ears, the dreams of Lucretius pondered by alien minds, and the human story would not pass without leaving its imprint on the universe.

The last probe was gone. Martinsen looked up at the globe of Earth, and then he took Ellam gently by the arm.

"Come on, Howard. Let's go home."

THE END

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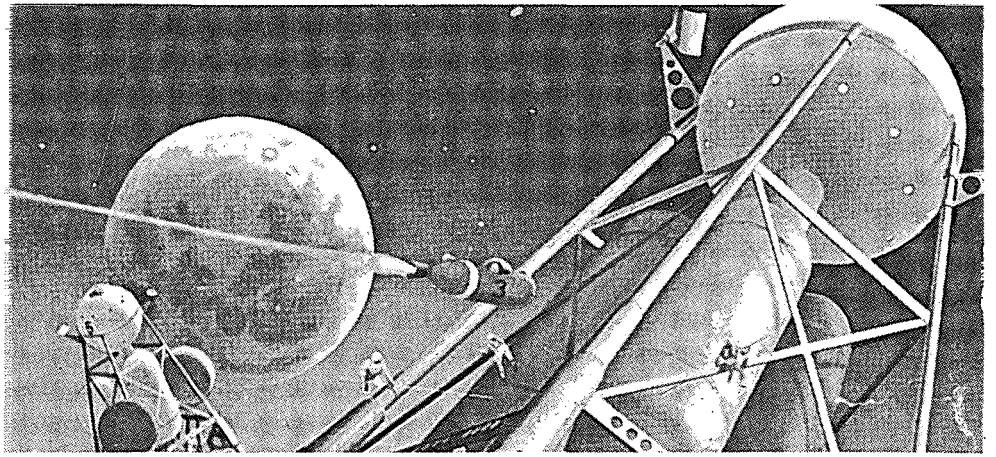

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